

A full-page illustration of the character Sister Itsuka. She is a young girl with long, flowing red hair and large, expressive red eyes. She has two long, white, horn-like appendages on her head. She is wearing a white, flowing dress with a large black bow at the waist and a black cross-shaped ornament on her chest. Her hair is adorned with black ribbons featuring yellow star patterns. The background is a soft-focus scene of a Ferris wheel and other amusement park structures under a blue sky with light clouds. The overall style is anime-inspired with vibrant colors and detailed shading.

Sister Itsuka
Spirit No. 5
Astral Dress—Efreet
Weapon—Halberd Type [Camael]

***Koushi
Tachibana***

Illustrated by
Tsunako

04

Date A Live
Sister Itsuka



*Date
A Live*

Sister Itsuka





“Sever, Camael!”

Kotori Itsuka
A fourth Spirit



“Hold me close.”

Origami Tobiichi
Shido's classmate



“Shido.
D-does
this look
good on
me...?”

Tohka
A Spirit



“Origami! No!
You have to stop!”

Shido Itsuka
A high school student

“...! Shido. Get out of my way.”



“Good...luck.”

Yoshino
A Spirit

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Date A Live

Sister Itsuka

04

Koushi Tachibana

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ON
New York

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Date A Live 04

Sister Itsuka

Koushi Tachibana

Translation by Jocelyne Allen

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Spirit

A uniquely catastrophic creature existing in a parallel world. Cause of occurrence and reason for existence unknown. Creates a spacequake and inflicts serious damage on her surroundings whenever she appears in this world. A very powerful fighter.

Strategy No. 1

Annihilate with force. This approach is very difficult, since the Spirit is extremely powerful, as noted above.

Strategy No. 2

...Date her and make her all weak in the knees.

Sister Itsuka

Spirit No. 5
Astral Dress—Efreet
Weapon—Halberd Type [Camael]

Chapter 6

Flames to Pierce Time

The roof of Raizen High School was blanketed in shadow. And not metaphorically.

At five PM, the sun was still shining, although it had started to angle downward. And there was not a cloud in the sky between that distant star and the earth's surface to obstruct its light. Yet a gloomy darkness curled around behind Shido Itsuka, as if this area alone had been cut out of the actual landscape.

He knew what this pseudo-night meant. Shido and everyone else on the roof were standing on the mouth of a catastrophe that would destroy their world.

Perhaps it was a whim on the part of the owner of the shadow. Or a change of heart. Or perhaps even an accidental blunder. Regardless of the cause, the danger this darkness posed threatened to eat them alive in the span of a heartbeat.

"...!" Shido gasped, his eyes round as saucers, in a space cut off from that world. He couldn't so much as twitch a finger, much less move from the spot. He found it nearly impossible to even speak a word.

The reason was extremely simple. Countless girls clutched different parts of him—hands, feet, body—and pinned him tightly to the ground. Slender fingers from somewhere forced their way into his mouth to hold even his tongue and jaw firmly in place.

This was obviously unusual.

The girls in black who encased the roof all looked identical to one another. Black hair tied back asymmetrically; skin so pale they almost looked sick. A left eye like a clockface with hour and minute hands. They were all perfect copies of Kurumi Tokisaki.

Shido could see Tohka and Origami nearby. They were both being held down by several Kurumis like he was, their faces scrunched in pain. And although he couldn't see her from where he was now, judging from how Mana had been shot down earlier, she had to have been on the other side of the wall of clones.

Things did not look good for them. Their fighters had all been taken out of the battle, and the force that bore down on them was overwhelmingly larger than their small group.

However...

"Ah..." With the fingers holding his tongue, Shido somehow managed to produce a sound that didn't quite make it to a word. Something else entirely had captured his attention.

When Kurumi had raised a hand up high to initiate a spacequake, *it* had appeared over their heads.

At first, it looked like the sun: A dense ball of flames materialized in the sky, as if to illuminate this shadowed region the real sun couldn't reach.

That was more than enough to hold his gaze fixed to that spot.

The moment he realized the true nature of this fire, he felt a shock like an electrical current to his brain stem. Sparks burst in his field of view, and a sharp pain stabbed the depths of his head, like his brain was trying to reject some fatal information his eyes were trying to communicate to him.

It was a girl. A small one, standing in the sky, her body cloaked in fire. The sleeves of her white kimono melted away into shimmering flames, her blazing obi belted around her body like the raiment of an angel. Two inorganic horns stretched out from either side of her head.

The way she looked. The power she wielded. All of it clearly indicated this girl was no ordinary human being.

She was a Spirit. A world-killing catastrophe. Shido knew of no other word to describe her.

Well, to be fair, he did know exactly one other word. He knew a name that would describe her.

“Ho-o...ri...,” he uttered, unable to move his tongue.

Kotori. Kotori Itsuka. He had lived with her for many years, and there was no way he would fail to recognize her face. This Spirit was his little sister, Kotori.

“Why...?” He frowned, unable to understand what this meant. Kotori was his little sister—a human being. She couldn’t be a Spirit.

But the scene before his eyes put lie to that idea. And it wasn’t only the scene before him.

Even as he tried desperately to reject this possibility, he felt like he had seen Kotori in this form somewhere before. His memory was hazy and unclear, but he’d felt like something had burst open in his mind as soon as he saw Kotori appear cloaked in flames in the sky. He was pretty sure—

“And who might youuuu be?” a voice suddenly called out, interrupting his thoughts.

Massive clock behind her, rifle in her right hand, pistol in her left, Kurumi frowned unhappily as she glared at Kotori in the sky above. “Would you mind not butting in? I was just getting to the good part.”

“Sorry, but I can’t let you do whatever you want. You took things a little too far. Kneel. The time for love’s punishment has come.” Kotori snorted, resting the massive battle-ax in her right hand on her shoulder.

Kurumi opened her eyes wide, briefly stunned at this unexpected speech, but then loud laughter spilled out of her uncontrollably. “Ngh. Keh-hee-hee-hee! Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! You *are* an interesting one, hmm? Punishment, is it? *You?* Punishing *me?*”

“Yes,” Kotori said. “If you don’t want a spanking, then you should be a good girl and put away all your little copies and your Angel.”

Kurumi giggled even harder. The countless clones surrounding her joined in, their bodies writhing with laughter.

“Hee-hee-hee! Hee-hee! It seems you’re *quite* confident of your abilities. But that arrogance will be your downfall, hmm? My Zafkiel—”

“Enough talk.” Kotori sighed, annoyed. “Come at me already, you black pig.”

Kurumi's expression stiffened, and her countless clones on the roof collectively glared up at Kotori in the sky.

Pained cries echoed through the air. A few of the Kurumis had taken aim at Tohka's and Origami's brain stems to knock them unconscious.

"Excellent work. Go! Dig in and devour her!" Kurumi called out.

The avatars bent their knees in perfect synchronization and launched themselves up after Kotori, a flock of black shadows shooting into the sky. This was less an assault or coordinated charge and more a merciless machine gun fired at lightning speed, a tyranny of demons flying to crush their opponent with sheer physical numbers.

The human bullets closed in on Kotori.

"Hmph." Kotori snorted in irritation and slowly lifted her battle-ax.

The inky-black handle was easily taller than she was, and at the top of it, an inferno coiled up into the shape of a blade. The flames seemed to burn brighter as Kotori hefted the weapon, leaving behind a trail of red.

"—Camael—Infernal Demon," Kotori said and swung the flaming battle-ax when the swarm of Kurumis was nearly upon her. Even on the ground where Shido lay helpless, he could hear the roar of it ripping through the air.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! It's nooo uuuuuse!" Kurumi cried, between peals of laughter.

However massive the battle-ax might have been, there was no way it could strike down the constellation of Kurumis charging from all sides. Once Kotori butchered the ones in the front, the rest would obviously sink their teeth into her a second later.

However...

"Kee-hee-hee! Hee...?" Kurumi's laughter ended abruptly.

When Kotori swung Camael, the blade of flames flickered, and the heads—or arms or entire torsos—of many clones spun through the air.

"Uh. Oh?" The Kurumis sounded stunned, staring at the body parts severed from the copies. A second later, these fleshy segments burst up in flame and

burned to ash before they even touched the ground.

“...” Kotori silently dropped her gaze down to Shido and swung Camael once more. The fire coiled like a snake to slice through the Kurumis clustered around him.

He heard shrieks of agony, and then the weight holding him down vanished.

“...!” He spit out the fingers in his mouth and hacked several times as he watched the bodies of these Kurumis also go up in flames.

“O-ow! That’s hot...!” He hurriedly sat up and beat out the sparks that fell onto his uniform.

Kotori floated down to stand between Shido and the real Kurumi, brandishing Camael at the other Spirit. As if to protect Shido.

“K-Kotori,” he stammered. “What on earth is—?”

“Quiet, Shido. Watch for your chance to escape and get out of here as fast as you can. You can die pretty easily the way you are now.”

“Huh? What’s that mean...?”

But his question was drowned out by Kurumi’s renewed laughter.

“Hee-hee! Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! My goodness, you do get things done!” Kurumi raised her eyebrows and twisted up the corners of her mouth as she held her guns in front of the massive clock. “Buuut I know you don’t actually believe that’s the end of this, hmm?”

Shido gasped. Kurumi still had Zafkiel, her time-controlling Angel.

“Kotori, be careful. She’s—!”

“Heh-heh!” Kurumi laughed as she loaded her pistol with the shadow that poured from Zafkiel’s / and placed the barrel against her own forehead. “Shido, please don’t act so boorishly!”

She pulled the trigger and vanished like mist.

At the same time, Kotori yanked Camael up above her head. He heard a loud squeal, and the battle-ax convulsed.

He’d seen this before when Kurumi and Mana were fighting. Zafkiel’s First

Bullet Aleph sped up the time of its target. Not even her shadow could keep up with her as Kurumi launched herself at Kotori.

But the flaming blade of Kotori's Camael shimmered and twisted to nimbly defend against attacks invisible to the naked eye.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Simply marvelous! Absolutely wonderful! I'd expect nothing less from a Spirit with her Angel materialized! My heart is pounding—racing in my chest!"

"Hmph! How annoying. A lady should have a little more composure than that." Kotori swung her ax as if to scorch the earth itself. Shido finally caught sight of Kurumi as the blade knocked her back.

She cackled as she sailed through the air awkwardly and then readied her guns, shouting, "Thank you for the advice. I shall acquiesce to your request and do you the courtesy of killing you in a ladylike manner. Zafkiel. Seventh Bullet Zayin!"

A shadow flew out of the *VII* on the massive clockface and was sucked into the barrel of Kurumi's gun. As she pulled the trigger, an inky-black bullet shot from the barrel and plunged toward Kotori.

From where Kotori was positioned, given the speed of the projectile and the distance between them, it seemed impossible for her to dodge this blow, but she managed to slap the bullet out of the air with the flaming blade of her battle-ax.

"Kotori!" Shido cried out, but it was no use.

Zayin. The most evil bullet, the one Kurumi had used to take Mana down.

Kotori could defend against it or knock it down, and it still wouldn't do any good. The instant she touched the bullet...

"Heh-heh. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Kurumi laughed as Kotori was immobilized.

And not just her body. The magically swaying sleeves of her Astral Dress, the flickering flames of Camael, even the ends of her hair moving in the breeze—they all froze in place.

“Heh-heh-heh! Whatever power you might have, you can’t really use it if you’re stopped now, can you?” Kurumi said, while the myriad of avatars remaining raised their guns, turned them on Kotori, and pulled their triggers.

“Stop—”

But of course, Shido’s cry came far too late. The Kurumis’ bullets homed in on Kotori and dug painful holes into her soft skin.

“Now, then. It’s been a pleasure.” The Kurumi that fired Zayin stood in front of Kotori, pressed the barrel of her gun to her forehead, and pulled the trigger without the slightest hesitation.

In the next instant, movement returned to Kotori’s body.

“...!”

Blood gushed from every part of her. But she didn’t even have the time to react to this. The final bullet, fired at lethal range, reached her brow, and she fell forward lifelessly.

“Kotori!” Shido half shrieked as he raced over to the spot to take his fallen sister in his arms.

He couldn’t, however. Ripped apart by Kurumis’ bullets, sinking into what amounted to an ocean of blood, her body was so battered, he feared it would simply fall to pieces if he so much as touched it.

“Ah. Ah.” He groaned. Beaten to the point where she was nearly unrecognizable, she couldn’t possibly live through this, he figured. He placed his hands on the ground, stunned.

“Heh-heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh! Aah, aah, it’s all over. And I thought I had found a suitably strong enemy at last. How cruel. How transient.” Kurumi twirled around theatrically and laughed. “It’s finally Shido’s turn! I—”

Kurumi stopped and frowned. She stared at Kotori facedown on the ground.

Drawn by her gaze, Shido looked at Kotori as well, and he too opened his eyes wide. “Wh-what...?”

Flames jetted from the bullet holes and spread over her, lapping at her body. He’d seen this before. Actually, more accurately, he’d *experienced* this before.

“You love put on a big show, hmm?” Kotori yanked herself upright on the balls of her feet, back straight, in an extremely unnatural way.

When the flames died down, all sign of injury and blood had vanished, and Kotori’s Astral Dress was no longer in tatters. It was impossible to believe that she had been mortally wounded. She coolly shook her head, so calm it made Shido wonder if he had hallucinated the whole attack.

“Wha—?” Kurumi frowned and took a step back. This, apparently, was a surprise to her, too.

Kotori readied Camael once more and glared at Kurumi. “Personally, the best outcome would be if you started shaking with fear and lost the desire to fight.”

“Hmph, please leave the joking...aside!” Kurumi threw her head back and turned the barrels of her guns behind her. The clock in her left eye whirred around while shadow after shadow poured out of Zafkiel’s / and into her guns.

“Aleph!” she shouted and pulled the triggers on both guns. The Alephs slammed into the Kurumi copies on the roof.

After firing several dozen bullets, she pressed one gun to her own head and pulled the trigger.

“Tch!” Kotori clicked her tongue in annoyance, swung one foot behind her, and kicked Shido in the side.

“Hngah?!” he cried pathetically as he was knocked backward. He slid along the ground on his spine, head scraping the concrete roof, until he came to a stop somehow. He sat up and rubbed his head. “Wh-what are you—?”

Before he could finish yelling his complaint, several superfast Kurumis sprang up to surround Kotori and shower her in punches, kicks, and bullets.

Which meant that Kotori had used her precious last action to send Shido to a safe zone right before Kurumis swarmed her violently, accelerated by the power of Aleph.

“Sever, Camael!” Kotori howled, and the blade of the Angel stretched several times over to cover an even broader swath of the roof.

One after the other, the flaming blade cut down the Kurumis, ripping through

them, piercing them, turning them to ash.

“Hngh!” With a pained grunt, Kurumi pulled away from Kotori.

It seemed that Camael’s attack had hit home. She had a strange and painful-looking wound from shoulder to stomach: half-burned, half-cut.

“What are you *doing*?!” she shouted, brandishing her pistol. “Zafkiel. Fourth Bullet Dalet!”

A shadow slid out from Zafkiel’s *IV* toward the gun in Kurumi’s hand. She put the barrel to her forehead and pulled the trigger, and her wound disappeared like time itself was rewinding. Meanwhile, the avatars racing around Kotori burned to ash and disappeared on the wind.

“What? You’re done already? That’s a bit of a surprise. You can go a little harder on me, you know?” Kotori snorted with disdain as she shouldered her battle-ax.

Kurumi twisted her face into a lurid grin and gritted her teeth.

“I shall make you regret those words! Zaaaaaaaaaaaaafkieeeeeeeeeeeel...!!”

Her left eye began to spin even faster.

“Tsk! None of that!” Kotori held Camael up at the ready and then dropped to her knees, a tiny, tiny moan slipping from her lips. “Ah.”

Using Camael like a staff, she managed to get on her feet as she pressed one hand to her head, a pained look on her face. “Ngh... Th-this...”

“K-Kotori?!” Shido cried out. He didn’t know what exactly was happening, but he could see she was in trouble.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So that’s the end of my bad luck!” Kurumi squealed with laughter and turned the rifle and its Zafkiel bullet toward Kotori.

“Ngh.” Shido was running before his thoughts had even caught up with him. He didn’t know what kind of power lay in the bullet in Kurumi’s gun. But it was no stretch of the imagination to assume that it was a mortal blow of some kind that would kill Kotori if it hit her.

When Kurumi pulled the trigger, he would grab Kotori and yank her out of the

bullet's path. And if he couldn't manage that, in the worst case, he would be her shield!

However...

"..." Kotori stood up just when Kurumi had her in her sights.

"Kotori! Are you okay?!" he cried, but Kotori didn't respond. She simply stared hard at Kurumi with eyes that shone quietly with a fiery red light. The face he was so familiar with suddenly looked like it belonged to a totally unknown girl. "Ko...tori...?"

Kotori brandished Camael high and released it. The battle-ax blade melted into the air, leaving only the handle floating in space.

"Camael. Megiddo," Kotori commanded, and in response, the handle of the Angel began to move, folding in on itself before wrapping around Kotori's raised right hand.



With her arm wrapped in this huge cudgel from elbow to fingertips, Kotori turned the end of it toward Kurumi, like the big gun on a battleship. Camael opened up and emitted a red glow as the flames curling around Kotori were sucked into this opening.

“...?!” Kurumi frowned, the barrel of her gun turned toward Kotori. It was an expression Shido hadn’t seen on her face before. He might have said it was close to fear or dread if he were forced to describe it based on his own knowledge and vocabulary.

“*WE—!!*” Kurumi shouted, while her other selves crawled up to put themselves between her and Kotori.

“Become destruction, Camael,” Kotori whispered. Her voice was cold and flat in a way that Shido had never heard before despite having lived with her for years.

A heartbeat later, Camael unleashed a conflagration. The overwhelming heat, the eruption of an enormous volcano compressed into an area of dozens of centimeters, drew a line from the roof of the high school into the distant sky above. For an instant, the area was colored bright red, as if the evening sun had arrived slightly early.

“Ngh.” Shido unconsciously covered his face with his arm. When he sucked in a tiny bit of this air, the heat coming in through his nose and mouth burned his mucous membranes and made it hard to breathe. Even though he was behind Kotori, his skin prickled like it was on fire, and it was almost impossible to keep his eyes open.

After a few seconds, the beam of incandescent light scorching the air steadily shrank, and the large cylinder on Kotori’s right hand sputtered white smoke like a machine that had finished a difficult job.

Coughing, he lifted his eyes as the smoke blanketing his field of view cleared. Shido shuddered.

The tremendous heat had melted the surface of the roof and its fence, and nothing remained in the blast’s wake—yet Kurumi and Zafkiel still stood in place.

All the other Kurumis that had crawled up to protect her had been burned away in the flames, and Kurumi herself had lost her left arm. The intense heat that had blown it away had charred the cross section, however, and not a drop of blood flowed.

A quarter of Zafkiel's massive face, floating behind Kurumi, had been blown away. The *I*, *II*, and *III* were all gone.

"Ngh. Aah..." Kurumi exhaled, pained, and dropped to her knees. Anyone could see that she was in no condition to continue fighting. However...

"Pick up your guns," Kotori growled, her voice low, as she turned the gun that Camael now was on Kurumi once more. "The battle's not over yet. The *war* is not over yet. Let's keep killing each other, Kurumi. It's the fight you wanted. *This* is the fight you wanted. If you're not going to point that gun at me anymore, you will die."

"Kotori? Wh-what are you saying?" Shido raced over to his little sister and grabbed her shoulders. "If you keep going, she'll die for real! Isn't Ratatoskr supposed to solve these problems *without* killing Spirits?!"

But Kotori had no time for Shido. Flames rose up once again in Camael's muzzle.

"...! H-hey! Kotori!" Shido went around in front of her and gasped, "Wha...?"

Cold ruby eyes shining with a bizarre light. On her mouth, an expression somewhere close to joy, ecstasy.

No way. A shiver ran up his spine. This was not the usual Kotori.

Shido started running toward Kurumi where she kneeled helplessly. "Kurumi!"

"Shi...do...?"

He had no time to try and run with her. Instead, he stood in front of her, blocking her to try and at least reduce the damage she took.

Camael let forth a crimson howl to burn up all of creation.

"Ngh!" Kotori's eyes flew open wide. "Shido! Out of the way!" She turned Camael toward the sky, but she couldn't completely change the trajectory of the flames already shooting forth.

“...” A red curtain dropped across the world before him, and Shido passed out.



Burning. Burning. The houses were burning.

Burning. Burning. The towns were burning.

Burning. Burning. The world was burning.

Flames leaped in the center of his vision. Crackling. Flickering. Roaring.

But Shido didn't stop moving.

“Kotori! Kotori!”

Shouting his little sister's name, he raced through streets transformed into a hellscape. He couldn't comprehend what was going on as he ran.

That was no wonder. Because when he came home, his familiar neighborhood was engulfed in flames.

It was Kotori's ninth birthday. He'd gone all the way toward the station to buy her a present in that area. He was grateful to Kotori, since he'd been able to escape the flames, but she was still at home. Despite the fact that it was their daughter's birthday, their busy parents were away—as always—for work. Kotori was alone at the house at this moment.

Kotori the crybaby. He was sure she was crying all by herself, unable to run away.

When that image flashed into his mind, Shido started running. Kotori. His adorable baby sister. The gentle girl who became his family when he had *nothing*.

A long time ago, back when he was abandoned by his biological mother and lost in despair, Shido had been saved by his mom and dad...and by Kotori. So he had to save her now. Shido wouldn't hesitate to give up even his own life if it was for her sake.

“Kotori!!” He ran toward the house, shouting her name over and over and over.

But then his feet stopped. The street before him was charred in spots, the

aftermath of flames burning through, and most everything was gone as though the fire had licked it all away.

And in the middle of the street, a single small girl was sobbing helplessly, crumpled to the ground.

That's...

The girl was wearing a strange outfit—traditional Japanese garb with a billowing hem and sleeves. Horns on her head...and *white ribbons* tied around them. Flames flickered around her.

Shido immediately knew this was his beloved little sister.

Kotori was crying. His body needed no other reason to move.

"Kotori!" He tossed aside the bag in his hand and ran toward her, shouting her name.

"Unh, ah, ah, Shido...! Shido. Shiiidoooo...!" Kotori sobbed as she rubbed her face with both hands.

When he tried to get near her, however, the flames twisting around her surged. Her eyes flew open with a gasp, and she trembled.

"Shido! You have to stay baaaaack!!!" she shouted so loudly that her teary voice threatened to give out.

"Huh?" he said, stunned.

But that was only natural. Before he knew it, the torrent of flames swelling out from Kotori slammed into him and sent him flying.

"Ah..."

Thud. He landed on his back on the ground. A searing pain raced up his spine, and the scorched skin all over his body shrieked in pain. But he couldn't even writhe in agony or cry out. All he could manage was a quiet moan as he stared up at the sky, his mind and vision blurred.

It might have been better if he had passed out. Unable to move so much as a finger, he simply watched coolly from afar as pain ripped through his body to torture him, and this disconnection scared him.

“*Shido!*” Kotori crawled over to him.

He had just wished to fade into unconsciousness, but his brain quickly shook off that delusion. At that moment, Shido wouldn't have traded a chance to see Kotori's face for anything in the world.

Large tears spilled from her eyes. When they dropped onto his hideously charred skin, they felt like little zaps of pain. He clenched his teeth to keep himself from groaning out loud. If he made Kotori cry any harder, he would have no right to call himself a good brother.

Vision hazy. Kotori's blurry face. The fading color of the sky. All of it was gradually losing reality.

“So do you want to save him?” came an abrupt voice from above.

“Ngh...!”

An intense pain cut through the slumber enveloping Shido. He pressed a hand to his forehead. As far as he could tell by touching it, his head wasn't cut open—no lumps or bumps. The sensation was more like a dull ache gradually pushing upward from the depths of his brain.

He groaned for a minute before opening his eyes to a ceiling adorned with an assortment of pipes of various sizes. He finally realized he was lying in a bed.

“Where am I...?” He blinked several times and took in his surroundings. Beds were lined up at regular intervals, and around each of them was a curtain partition.

He knew this space. He had woken up here once before. This was the medical office of Ratatoskr's airship *Fraxinus*.

He slapped the side of his head lightly to wake his dazed brain as he sat up. “Ow-ow...” He grimaced. It wasn't just his head; every joint in his body hurt.

For some reason, he felt something weird with his lips. Had something touched them before he passed out?

But that concern quickly became secondary for a simple reason: A familiar girl was leaning up against his bed, fast asleep.

Beautiful hair the color of night, smooth porcelain skin. With impossibly

perfect features, she looked like a sleeping princess out of some fairy tale. If you ignored the string of drool hanging from one corner of her mouth, that is.

“Tohka...?” Shido asked.

The girl—Tohka Yatogami—showed no sign of having heard him call her name. Her shoulders rose and fell regularly as she inhaled and exhaled the soft breath of sleep.

“What is Tohka doing here—? No, wait. What am I—?” he muttered, but was cut off by the door opening. Two pairs of feet stepped inside.

“...Mm? Oh, so you’re awake, Shin?” asked a twentyish woman in a chestnut military uniform. Ratatoskr analyst Reine Murasame with distinctive dark bags under her eyes and pale skin that hinted at a life spent indoors.

“Reine? And—” Shido glanced behind her.

A girl on the edge of adolescence was standing there, almost hiding behind the older woman. Her unnatural blue hair and beautiful sapphire eyes were veiled beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat. Her left hand was covered by a comical-looking rabbit puppet, and she flapped this hand from time to time.

“Oh, Shido,” the puppet crooned. “You’re fine, after all? Can’t believe I wasted my time worrying about you.”

“I’m glad...you’re okay,” the girl said, no louder than a mosquito buzzing.

“Yoshino, you’re here. What on earth is going on...?”

“Ahem.”

“O-oh, sorry. Hey, Yoshinon. You came, too, huh?” Shido flashed a smile at the disgruntled puppet before turning his gaze back on Reine. “What am I doing here?”

“...Mm. We brought you when you passed out after the battle with Kurumi Tokisaki.”

“...!”

Kurumi Tokisaki, the girl who had suddenly transferred to Shido’s school—a Spirit. The moment her name came out of Reine’s mouth, the faint throbbing in

Shido's head became a stabbing pain.

"R-right!" The events of the previous day were suddenly vivid in his mind. "Wh-what happened after that?! Tohka's just sleeping, right? She's not hurt or anything? And what about Kotori?! She showed up all of a sudden—and like, what was that?! What about Origami?! She was really beat up!"

"...Calm down, Shin."

"Ngh. Oh yeah. And what happened to Mana?! I lost sight of her halfway through the fight! She's okay, right?! And Kurumi! She's alive, right?! And everyone at school—"

Shido stopped there. To be more accurate, he was stopped there. Because Reine was hugging his head tightly.

"Mm! Mm?!" he cried through closed lips.

"...There, there." Reine gently stroked his hair. Shido's focus was more on the warm chest his face was shoved up against. He tapped her arm to signal his surrender. A few seconds later, she finally released him. "...Have you calmed down?"

"H-haah..." He sighed before raising questioning eyes. Reine nodded. Behind her, Yoshino was covering a red face with one hand, staring at him between her fingers.

"...You can relax. Everyone's fine. To my knowledge, there were no deaths. Although the local hospital was overwhelmed. AST members came to recover Origami Tobiichi and Mana Takamiya and likely transported them to the SDF Tengu Hospital. They've got medical Realizers there. Kurumi took advantage of the chaos and fled. Tohka is as you can see. She was also injured, but she insisted on staying here and taking care of you. She just fell asleep because she's tired."

"...!" Shido clenched his teeth and his fists.

He hadn't been able to settle anything. He'd talked about how he was going to save Kurumi and how he'd save Mana, but he hadn't managed to do anything at all. Mana had been seriously injured by Kurumi; Tohka, Origami, and students at school had been dragged into the fight; and he still hadn't been able to lock

away Kurumi's power.

"Dammit!" He punched the bed in frustration.

"...You did good," Reine assured. "Don't be too hard on yourself."

"B-but...!"

"...No one expected Kurumi to have that kind of power. In fact, you should be glad no one died this time. And this isn't the end. If you still want to rescue her, then save that hand for slapping her cheek when you yell at her."

"...Okay," Shido whispered, and then his eyes flew open. One person—one very important person—was missing from that update. "Reine! What about Kotori? Where is she?"

Reine nodded, as if she had been waiting for him to ask that question. "...I'll take you to her. Can you stand up?"

"Y-yes." He folded the blanket down to his feet, put on the shoes laid out next to the bed, and stood up. Perhaps because he'd been on his back for so long, he felt a little dizzy and lost his balance.

"...!" Yoshino raced out from Reine's side to hold him up.

"O-oh, sorry. Thanks, Yoshino." He smiled at her in appreciation.

"N-no problem." Yoshino turned her face away, looking embarrassed somehow. Yoshino on her left hand whistled.

"...Are you okay? Maybe it would be better to rest a—"

"No, I'm okay. Take me to Kotori."

Reine narrowed her eyes, as if assessing him, but soon let out a small sigh and nodded. "...Follow me."

She turned around slowly, and Shido tucked Tohka into the bed before starting to go after Reine. Yoshino moved with him, still holding his waist.

"Yoshino? I'm okay now."

"...! Oh. Okay... But...it's...dangerous."

Did he look that feeble to her? Regardless, he had no reason to make a show

of pushing her away.

“Okay then, thanks,” he said with another smile, and they started walking together. For some reason, the rabbit puppet was grinning in a knowing kind of way, but that was nothing out of the ordinary, so he didn’t touch on that.

His feet echoed down the narrow hallway of *Fraxinus*. After they’d gone some distance, he frowned. He had assumed they were headed for the bridge like always, but Reine had chosen a different, unfamiliar route.

“...Here we are.” Reine stopped in front of a door.

Shido looked at it and gasped.

It wasn’t as though he was particularly knowledgeable about the internal configuration of *Fraxinus*. He had been aboard the ship a number of times, but he’d never been given an actual tour, and about the only places he went were the lower part where the transport device was, the bridge, the medical office, the washroom, and the cafeteria.

To be honest, he didn’t exactly know where in the ship he was at that moment or what the purpose of this room was. But he could guess at what this door was for, given that it looked like a large bank vault.

“Where are we?” He sent Reine a questioning look but got no reply.

Instead, Reine stood in front of the electronic panel to one side of the door, entered some numbers, and then held up the palm of her hand. “...Analyst Reine Murasame.”

The panel made a small beep, and the large door split in two and opened.

“...All right. Come.” Reine stepped inside. Shido gulped audibly and followed her.

He frowned. It was a strange room. The front and back were separated by a glass wall, and the space beyond the wall was entirely different from the space on this side.

The front area where they stood was something along the lines of a dim laboratory with all kinds of equipment crammed into every available space, while the back area was set up like a normal apartment. It was almost like a

cage to confine and monitor a ferocious beast.

And inside this strange room, Kotori was sitting on a stylish chair on the other side of the glass partition, gracefully drinking black tea. No longer clad in her Astral Dress, she was wearing her usual street clothes.

Shido let out an unconscious sigh of relief at his little sister looking entirely normal again. “Kotori!” he called, but she gave no sign of having heard him.

“...Sounds from this side won’t reach her. Shin. You go alone from here,” Reine said and walked over to what looked like a door at one edge of the glass wall.

Yoshino pulled away from Shido. He thanked her again and then stepped toward Reine.

She did the same palmprint and voice authentication as before, and the door opened. Shido dipped his head in thanks before stepping inside. When he did, he saw out of the corner of his eye how strangely thick the glass dividing the room was, and the tension that had started to ease felt palpable once more.

“Hmm? Oh, why if it isn’t Shido. So you’re awake.” Kotori lifted her gaze after noticing his intrusion.

“Y-yeah,” he replied awkwardly. For some reason, he felt a little uncomfortable.

“Why don’t you sit instead of just standing there? Although if you’re gunning to be a scarecrow, I’ll root for you as you chase your dream.”

“Oh. No... Hmm. Right.” He did as he was told and sat down in the chair across from her. He glanced in the direction of Reine and Yoshino, but he couldn’t see any sign of them. The partition that looked like glass from the other side was a white wall on this side.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

They faced each other silently, a table between them.

Despite the fact that he had so many things he wanted to ask her, when he actually had her there in front of him, he didn’t know what to say. Kotori didn’t

look the least bit nervous as she stirred her milk tea with a cinnamon stick and then popped the stick into her mouth.

“...Wait. Is that a Chupa Chups?!” Shido cried out. Soaking in the tea was not a cinnamon stick or spoon but the candy with the small paper stick—Kotori’s favorite treat.

“What? You got a problem with that?” She arched an eyebrow at him.

“No, not particularly!” he shouted before letting out a sigh. He felt like the tension had unexpectedly drained out of his shoulders. Silently giving the smallest thanks to the Chupa Chups, he spoke again. “Kotori. Who exactly *are* you?”

“Shido’s adorable little sister.”

“...Most people don’t call themselves adorable.”

“But aren’t I adorable?”

“...Well, I won’t deny that.” Shido tousled her hair before placing his hands on his knees and lowering his head. “Kotori... Are you a Spirit?”

Straight to the point. Plain and simple. He asked about the thing that concerned him the most.

“Hmph.” Kotori snorted and shrugged. “If I said no, would you believe me?”

So this was what he was up against. Shido bobbed his head up and down. “Yeah. If you said no, I’d believe you.”

“...Have you lost it? I seriously doubt that an intelligent person would believe someone else’s words over their own eyes.”

“If I stopped believing what my adorable little sister told me, I might be first-class in terms of brain power, but that’d be the end for me as a brother.”

“...” Kotori set her cup down on its saucer and stared back at him wordlessly. After a few seconds, she let out a sigh. “I’m human. At least, I think I am. But I don’t get to decide that, apparently. The measurement devices currently register me as a Spirit.”

“How did that...?” He furrowed his brow, unable to really grasp what she was

saying.

Normally, she would shoot him a sharp insult, but now she continued speaking, as though his question were only natural. “I am a human being born to the Itsukas. There’s no doubt about that. But five years ago...I *became* a Spirit.”

“Huh...?” Shido’s jaw dropped, and he stared at her, stunned.

A Spirit was a uniquely catastrophic creature existing in a parallel world. At least, that’s what Kotori and Reine had told him.

“What does that mean?” he asked. “Aren’t humans and Spirits different species?”

“Well... Right.” Kotori nodded. “Maybe it would be more appropriate to say I’m a human with the powers of a Spirit.”

“How is that...?” He frowned and cut himself off. An image from his memory popped up in his mind. “Oh.”

A dream. The dream he’d had before waking up earlier. In the middle of a street on fire, Kotori had been sitting alone, crying, wearing an Astral Dress. A dream.

“What’s wrong, Shido?” she asked.

“Oh. Uh... I... I...knew that...?”

“What do you mean?” The look on her face was suddenly serious.

Shido unconsciously shrank back. “Wh-what do you mean, what do I mean...?”

“It’s just you used to not remember anything about the fire five years ago. Or that I became a Spirit.”

“Ah, yeah... But, like... Umm. Don’t laugh, okay?”

“I won’t laugh.” She crossed her arms, indignant.

“So...” Shido scratched the back of his head. “I just had...this dream.”

“A dream? What kind of dream?”

“H-hmm...” When he explained the details, Kotori’s cheeks colored faintly, and she turned her face away.

“...Well, I would like to object to the part where I was crying and calling your name...but that’s more or less what I remember.” She placed a thoughtful hand on her chin and flicked the stick of her Chupa Chups up. “Maybe as a side effect of me drawing the Spirit power out of you, that memory flowed into you through the same Path. Or maybe this caused your own memories to rise to the surface? Hmm. Either way, it’s very interesting.” She nodded to herself.

“...Don’t get all scholar on me. Focus, Kotori.”

“Hmm? What?” She lifted her face to look at him.

“You said you...became a Spirit,” he said. “What exactly happened five years ago?”

Spirits and humans were different species. What did it mean for a human to turn into a Spirit or gain the powers of one?

Kotori shook her head. “I don’t really remember.”

“Huh? You don’t remember?”

“Mm. I have this vague feeling that something happened, but I can’t remember what. I mean, I do remember becoming a Spirit, but I have no idea what caused that.”

“People usually remember getting turned into a superpowerful being, y’know!”

“Says the brother who forgot this very fact about his own sister. I don’t think you have much of a leg to stand on here.”

“Hngh.” She had him there. This brought up another question for him. “For all that, you seemed pretty comfortable with the whole fighting thing,” he remarked, recalling the scene on the roof. Kurumi might have gotten away, but Kotori had clearly overpowered her.

“It’s weird. I mean, I’ve trained on a simulator, but that was my first time in actual battle... But, well, my memory of becoming a Spirit’s pretty hazy, so maybe something happened then. I was honestly surprised. My body just

moved like it knew exactly what to do.”

“Wha...? S-so then canceling out the spacequake...?” he asked.

“Yeah, that was off the cuff. Reine’s calculations said it was possible, but I definitely do not want to do that again. If I’d failed, the damage would’ve probably doubled.”

Her casual attitude was making him break out into a cold sweat.

She sighed before continuing. “But... Well, you’re right, Shido.”

“I am?”

“I shouldn’t have forgotten something so important. I agree. If I were you, I could see that happening, but there’s no way I would forget something that turned my own life upside down.”

“Wait. What do you mean, if you were me?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

Kotori ignored him and kept talking. “We both lost our memories of whatever it was that happened five years ago. You don’t think that’s weird?”

“...! That’s...”

“Say, like, someone erased our memories.”

“Wha—?” Someone erased their memories? Shido scowled at the creepy idea.

It was possible using a Realizer—or a Spirit in possession of some power—to affect the human mind. But who would do that? And to what end?

Kotori shrugged. “At best, it’s a possibility.”

This did not reassure him. His back remained damp with sweat.

When he thought about it, this did actually make some sense. But given that neither of them could remember any details, there was no use considering it now. Shido decided to ask about the other thing that was bothering him.

“But... You went back to regular life afterward, right? How did you do that?” He remembered that Kotori Itsuka had spent her life with him since the fire five years earlier.

“You don’t remember?” she asked. “It’s because you sealed my power away, obviously.”

“Huh?” he said, stunned. “I—I did...?”

“Yep.” She nodded firmly. “Remember how I told you yesterday that I was taking the power *back* for a bit?”

Now that she mentioned it, he felt like she had said something to that effect when she appeared the day before.

“I did...” He placed a hand on his forehead and groaned. The throbbing pain that had jumped to life when he saw Kotori in her Astral Dress had returned.

He couldn’t remember. He could call up other things that had happened in his life, more or less hazily, but for some reason, he came up blank in regard to this incident five years ago.

“Yeah. And after you sealed my power, Ratatoskr found me. And then...I learned about everything happening behind the scenes, about the existence of the Spirits...and I wanted to help them.”

“...” He had wondered why Kotori would be the commander of a secret organization like Ratatoskr when she wasn’t even fourteen, and now it finally fell into place.

“That’s the reason you were chosen to talk to the Spirits, Shido,” she continued. “I don’t know why, but you’ve got the ability to lock away Spirit power.”

“Oh.” His eyes grew wide. That was indeed a question he’d had. Even if he did have such an ability, how had Ratatoskr discovered it?

The answer turned out to be trivial: They had an actual example of its use with Kotori five years earlier.

This triggered another question for him. Every time Kurumi shot Kotori, flames had licked across the wounds gouged out of her skin and healed them. He was certain that had been the regeneration ability he’d manifested himself.

“So then—”

“Yes.” Kotori nodded, as if guessing his thoughts from the look on his face.

“Your ability to regenerate was originally my power. So now you’re going to have to stand up, Shido.”

“Huh? Wh-why?”

“Just do it.”

He did as instructed.

Kotori launched a sharp fist into his solar plexus, and Shido bent in half, moaning. “Hnghah?!”

“I told you. I told you, didn’t I?” she snapped. “That you had to be careful. I said you could die the way you were. And then what? You go leaping out in front of me. You go jumping in front of Camael, trying to protect Kurumi! It’s all fine and good that I came back to my senses just in time to divert my attack, but if I’d been half a second slower, you’d be ash right now! And Kurumi got away because of this! Hey! Are you listening to me?!”

“I—I am... I’m listening, so quit shaking me...,” he managed to say. After a while, when he could finally breathe again, he sat back down with a sigh. “Ow-ow. Where did that come from?”

“Hmph. It’s necessary to discipline a dog that won’t listen.”

Shido was about to retort but then set that argument on the back burner. There was something that concerned him more. “Kotori. Just now, you said you came *back* to your senses?”

“...!” Her back stiffened.

Shido recalled what had happened on the roof. Kotori pointing Camael, transformed into a gun of sorts, at Kurumi. That had not been his usual sister.

She sighed in resignation. “I did say that.”

“But you were talking like you were with us, attacking Kurumi and everything. What was that about then?”

“...I don’t know. Since I took my Spirit power back from you...there’ll be times when I want to destroy something or kill someone so much I can hardly stand it. And my body stops doing what I tell it to. We’re managing it somewhat with medication right now, but... I was definitely trying to kill Kurumi then.”

“Wha...?” He gaped.

“Maybe I was able to come back to myself then because you stepped out in front of her. So I’m grateful to you for that, just a teensy bit.” Kotori smiled ruefully as she shrugged self-deprecatingly.

Shido had no idea what to say. The information she’d shared with him hammered at his brain relentlessly.

“It’s scary,” she continued. “I don’t know what I’ll end up doing. I can’t control myself. And maybe I did something five years ago, and I just don’t have any memory of it. Given that I don’t remember, it’s totally possible that I killed someone. And in that case, I—”

“Kotori...”

She stopped there and shook her head as if to shake away her fear. “Forget I said that. It’s not like me to talk like this.”

“Y-yeah,” he stuttered. “But...is your Spirit power still in you?”

“Uh-huh. Otherwise, there’d be no reason to lock me up in isolation, would there?” She swiveled her head to look around the room.

To the eye, it was only a room, nicely decorated, but having walked down the hallways that led here, Shido didn’t feel like it was a comfortable space at all.

“B-but when Tohka’s power flowed back, it naturally returned to me, right? Why—?”

“Because the absolute amount of Tohka’s power that flowed back was small,” she interrupted. “So long as Tohka’s mentally calm, it naturally goes through that Path back to you. But it’s different for me. I pulled pretty much one hundred percent of my power out of you. At that level, it’s not going to go back naturally.”

“S-so then how are we going to—?” he managed to choke out.

Perhaps the way he looked was particularly funny—Kotori opened her mouth with a grin. “Well, I guess the only thing is to seal it away again.”

“S-seal it again?” he parroted. “How?”

“It’s simple,” she said, pulled the Chupa Chups out of her mouth, and thrust it at him.

“Make me all weak in the knees.”

“Wh-what?!” he cried out, stunned. “M-make you weak in the knees...? What do you...?”

Kotori popped her lollipop back into her mouth and raised her cup as she shrugged. “Just like you did with Tohka and Yoshino. That’s the only way to seal a Spirit’s power.”

“So—so you mean...” Shido recalled his encounters with Tohka and Yoshino. He’d been required to date them and raise his likability.

“...”

His eyes unconsciously turned toward Kotori’s lips. After all, the same method as with Tohka and Yoshino meant...

“...!” He heard a crash and jumped in his seat.

Kotori had dropped the cup in her hand. The white porcelain vessel broke, and the milk tea inside splashed against the floor.

“K-Kotori? Are you okay? Are you hurt?” he asked, furrowing his brow.

Kotori lowered her eyes as she took a deep breath and shook her head from side to side. “I’m okay. Don’t worry about it.” She held the hand that had dropped the cup with her other hand and brought it beneath the table as if to avoid his eyes.

“Don’t worry...?” he repeated.

“I said I’m fine. Anyway, I’m a bit tired. Could you leave now?”

“No, I can’t do that. C’mon. You might have gotten a cut; show me your hand —”

“...Shin.”

Just as Shido reached a hand out to Kotori, he heard this voice and the door opening behind him.

Reine walked into the space, carrying a black bag.

“Reine?” he asked. “Is something wrong?”

“...Mm-hmm,” she hummed noncommittally. “Sorry, but that’ll have to be all for today. Could you go on ahead of me?”

“Huh? B-but...,” he protested.

“...I’ll manage with Kotori somehow. Go. Now.”

Kotori also lowered her face and nodded.

“O-okay...” It seemed that he had no say in the matter. He obediently followed orders and went through the door to the room where Yoshino was still waiting.

Here, he noticed something different. When he turned his eyes to the space where Kotori was, the wall that had previously been glass was now colored white, and he couldn’t see through to the other side anymore.

“What the...?”

A few minutes later, Reine came through the door and back into the space where Shido and Yoshino were.

“Reine, how’s Kotori...?” Shido asked.

“...Mm, she’s fine,” Reine told him. “No worries. For now anyway.”

“F-for now?”

“...” Reine silently sat down and lowered her eyes. “...Two days from now.”

“Huh?”

“...Two days. June eleventh. You’re going on a date with Kotori.”

“Huh?” He frowned. “That’s... Well, I’ll ask anyway. Why in two days?”

“...That’s the only possible day. Kotori can probably only withstand her own Spirit power for another two days.”

“...?!” He stiffened at this. “Wh-what do you mean...?!”

“...The interval between episodes is getting shorter. Right now, we’re controlling it with tranquilizers and mood stabilizers... But another two days is probably the limit. Beyond that point, it’s possible that Kotori will stop being

the Kotori that you know.”

“...”

He couldn't speak. His throat was dry as the desert, and his fingers trembled slightly.

With no prior warning, he had been thrust into the worst possible situation. In just two days, Kotori would stop being Kotori. Unless he could lock her power away.

“S-so we should go right now!” he cried.

“...” Reine put her hand to her chin thoughtfully before letting out a defeated sigh. “...That really would be best.”

“Huh?”

“...No. We can't do that. I told you, didn't I?” she said. “Right now, we're controlling her symptoms with medication. We have to wait until she stabilizes.”

“B-but in two days—”

“...That's the only day when the two conditions line up. If we miss the day after tomorrow, assume we won't have another chance.”

“Ngh.” Shido gritted his teeth, and Reine sighed quietly as she turned toward the console.

“...At any rate, leave this to me. You go check in on Mana, Shin. You should still be able to make visiting hours at the hospital.” She indicated the door as if to chase Shido and Yoshino out.

“B-but—,” he protested again.

“...Please. Just do it.”

“...Fine.” Sensing something out of the ordinary in Reine's attitude, he obediently left the room with Yoshino, bowing. “Please take care of Kotori.”

Then he started walking toward the lower part of the ship, the place where the transport gate to the ground was.

“...Make Kotori weak in the knees...,” he muttered, quietly enough so that

Yoshino next to him couldn't hear.

If he didn't, Kotori would stop being Kotori.

Kotori. His little sister. That stern, strong-willed Commander Kotori Itsuka.
Make *her* weak in the knees?

It seemed like an impossibly difficult mission.

Chapter 7

Kotori Conference

The scene before her could have easily been mistaken for hell.

The familiar streets of the residential area were alive with crimson flames. The neat rows of houses, the street she always took to and from school, the trees in the park—tongues of fire lapped at everything like her neighborhood was nothing more than a pile of burnable garbage, and the world around her was gradually reduced to ash and charcoal. Mixed in with the roar of the blazing conflagration were the shrieks and footfalls of people fleeing, punctuated every so often with the *boom* of something exploding.

“*What...is this...?*” Origami asked, stunned, as she stared at this scene removed from reality.

Asking questions was a waste of time. During the few seconds it took her to articulate the words, she would have been far better served by putting her feet in motion. But there was no one around to call her out on her foolish behavior. And for a child of twelve, the situation was impossible to grasp at the drop of a hat.

She had come back from the grocery store to a neighborhood that was something entirely different than the one she’d set out from. The fact that she didn’t simply sink to the ground right then and there might have been because she possessed some measure of composure.

And then her eyes flew open wide.

“*Dad! Mom!*”

Her parents would still have been at home.

The moment she remembered this, Origami tossed aside the bags she was carrying and started running.

It wasn't as if a child could do anything charging in there by herself, and her parents might have already evacuated on their own. But in her confused state, Origami couldn't think things through. She simply ran down a road that was in a very different state than it had been hours earlier.

When she arrived at her house a few minutes later, her face filled with despair. Her house was cloaked in red flames like all the others, and she could only see its shadow.

"No..."

It wasn't as if she hadn't imagined this would happen. Even so, she'd had hope—a tiny glimmer of it—until she actually saw her home. But now...

"...?!"

She jumped as the front door of her house was kicked open from the inside. Her father stumbled out, sweat pouring down his forehead, his arm around her mother's shoulders.

"Dad! Mom!" she shrieked.

"You came back, Origami?!"

"Are you hurt? It's not safe here. We have to run!" Her father called to her, reaching out with one hand and stepping forward.

She was so happy to see they were both alive. She nodded several times, tears in her eyes, and then reached out to take her father's hand.

"Huh?" she said, unable to process what was happening for a moment.

As soon as she stretched out her arm, a beam of light shot down from the sky in front of her. There was a violent shock wave, and she was knocked flying through the air like a rag doll.

"Aaah!"

She slammed into a concrete wall a few meters away and coughed several times. Pain spread in her side each time she did. She must have cracked a rib or two. It hurt so much, tears filled her eyes.

She was more worried about her parents' safety. Enduring the pain somehow,

she turned her gaze toward the spot where she had last seen them.

But there was no one there now. The earth itself had been gouged out, and nothing remained in the area but a small crater.

She crawled toward it.

“Ah... Ah... Aaaaah.”

Origami found what had been her mother and father in the cavity, and her teeth began to chatter.

She felt dizzy, like the world was twisting. Despair descended upon her, painting over the bright reds before her with ash and darkness.

Why? How? The questions swirled around and around in her mind futilely, unanswerable.

“...!” She lifted her face, as if searching for the light that had just burned her parents. And she froze with shock once again.

“An angel...,” she murmured, stunned. There was an angel floating in the sky.

Of course, she knew that such a thing did not exist in this world, but this was the only word that popped into her head to describe the being before her eyes.

Vision blurred by pain, she couldn't take in the details of the angel creature, but she could tell that it had a human shape. A slender silhouette floating above them all, as if lording over the burning town. Most likely, a young girl.

This shadow touched a hand to Origami's head, and her body shook. Like she was crying. Or laughing.

“You're the one who...”

To Mom. And to Dad.

Origami's voice faded into nothing. She clenched fists dripping with blood and glared up at the angel floating above the sea of flames. She began to shout, her voice full of hatred, *“You won't get away with this! I'll kill you... I will kill you! And that's a promise...!”*

Here, Origami Tobiichi regained consciousness. Her eyes flew open.

“...! ...!”

Her breathing was ragged, even though she'd been asleep until that moment.

She sat up and took several deep breaths to try and calm her pounding heart. Air smelling faintly of antiseptic cycled in and out of her trachea and lungs.

Once she had her breathing under control again, she slowly looked around to see where she was. White ceiling and white walls. In the corner of her eye, she could see a stand with IV bags hanging from it.

She quickly realized she was in a bed in a room at the SDF hospital, a place where she'd received care many times before. Lucky for her, she'd been placed in a private room.

“...”

Wordlessly, she wiped her forehead. A bandage had been neatly wrapped around her head, but it was drenched from night sweat. Of course, the bandages in other places and the back of her hospital gown were also damp. She grabbed the gown sticking to her back and flapped it to let air pass through.

She didn't usually sweat so much while she slept. This must have been because of the dream she'd just had: the scene when her parents had died five years earlier.

She later learned the name of the being she'd mistaken for an angel then. A Spirit, a uniquely catastrophic creature. That disaster had been caused by hands that were not human.

She'd stopped having the nightmares lately, so why was she having them now?

“...!” She gasped. She remembered the reason why she was there.

“Shido!” Origami called out the name of her beloved.

After engaging in combat with and being held captive by the Spirit Kurumi Tokisaki on the roof of Raizen High School, Origami had been knocked unconscious.

She was concerned about the well-being of Shido and Mana, as well as the current situation with Kurumi. (There may have been one other person on the roof who could be easily mistaken for human garbage, but there was no need to

worry about her.) The fact that Origami was alive meant that it was highly likely the others were also all right. She could only conjecture at this point. At any rate, she wanted information.

She lowered her eyes, searching her memories for the moments before she passed out, and then swallowed hard. When Origami had been held captive by the avatars and Kurumi had turned toward Shido, something impossible had appeared from the sky.

“A Spirit...of flames!” Origami spat, like a curse, seeing this Spirit flash through her mind.

A fire Spirit. Code name: Efreet. The one responsible for the infernal blaze in the district of Nanko five years earlier. The Spirit who had killed Origami’s parents right in front of her.

“I found you. At last...”

This was the enemy she had hunted and searched for over the last five years. The target of her vengeance, whom she had resolved to kill even if it meant her own life. Maybe it was a coincidence, but Origami had finally reached her.

Her heart pounded fiercely, and the breathing she had only just gotten under control grew ragged again. Her long-held desire was at her fingertips, and an emotion akin to ecstatic joy turned her mind upside down.

For some reason, however, she had the strange feeling that something was not quite right. She had seen the face of this Spirit of flames from the roof—Efreet—somewhere other than that excruciating moment five years ago. But where exactly? Even when she racked her brain, the answer would not come to her.

After considering this for a few minutes, Origami lifted her face and threw her legs over the side of the bed. She put on the slippers laid out on the floor and stood up.

She couldn’t change the fact that she couldn’t remember. Given that she had been brought here, however, she imagined Mana was probably also in the hospital somewhere. The girl might have more details to share.

Origami ignored the slight dizziness that washed over her and started to

walk...until the IV tubes yanked on her arm, and she fell back onto the bed.



“This is...the place, right?” Shido murmured, looking back and forth between the map in his hand and the large building before him.

The sign on the gate read SDF TENGU HOSPITAL. It seemed like this was indeed it.

“I hope she’s okay...”

When Mana had come running to his side while he faced off against Kurumi the day before yesterday, Kurumi’s Seventh Bullet Zayin had stopped time, and Mana had been badly injured. If she were going to be taken anywhere, he guessed it would be to the SDF hospital, so he’d come to see how she was doing.

He slipped through the gates and walked up to the reception desk. “Um,” he started.

“Yes?” the woman at the desk asked. “Is this your first visit? If you’re a member of the general public, you’ll need a letter of recommendation.”

“Oh. No. I’m a visitor,” he told her. “Where’s Mana Takamiya’s room?”

“Mana Takamiya? Are you a family member?”

“Um... Y-yes,” Shido stammered. Mana Takamiya was Shido’s actual little sister. Apparently.

In point of fact, he himself had no memory of her, but Mana insisted there was no mistake. Shido couldn’t handle more questions that were sure to come if he denied that connection now. He simply nodded in agreement.

“Wait just a moment, please.” The receptionist began to tap away at her computer with practiced hands. A minute or so later, she opened her eyes wide in surprise and turned back to him. “Er, I’m terribly sorry, but Mana Takamiya is currently receiving special treatment. She’s not permitted any visitors at this time.”

“Wha...t?!” Shido cried. “I-is she going to be okay?”

“Hmm. The file doesn’t list any further details...”

“But her family deserves an explanation at the very least,” he protested.

“I really am sorry. Because *special equipment* is being used for Miss Takamiya’s treatment, we aren’t allowed to discuss any of the particulars with the public. Hospital rules...”

“That’s... Can’t you do something for me here?” he pleaded. “Just let me have a peek at her...please...”

“I—I understand you’re concerned, but...” The receptionist looked troubled.

“Shido?” said a familiar voice from behind him.

He looked over his shoulder and saw a girl in a hospital gown holding on to an IV stand.

“Origami?”

His classmate Origami Tobiichi was standing there. Her most distinctive features were hair that tickled her shoulders and a face like a doll. She had a bandage wrapped around her forehead and plasters patching up her slender limbs.

When she saw his face, she breathed a small sigh. Although her expression didn’t change at all, it seemed she was relieved.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” she told him.

“Y-yeah.” For whatever reason, he felt a little shy when she was so obviously worried about his well-being. He averted his eyes as he ruffled his own hair.

Origami continued to stare at him. “And Tohka Yatogami?”

“...?! ”

His eyes snapped back to her face, surprised. Which was only natural. Tohka and Origami did nothing but fight when they saw each other. He never dreamed that Origami would ever be worried about Tohka.

Maybe being in the same class at school had given Origami a new understanding of Tohka. This made Shido happy somehow, and he nodded.

“Oh, Tohka’s fine.”

“Tch!”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

He felt like he saw an expression very unlike her flit across the face of Lady Origami Tobiichi—ever cool and collected—but maybe he’d imagined it. He decided to believe that and mustered a smile.

“A-anyway, what’s up?” he asked. “Why are you out here? Your room’s gotta be on a different floor, yeah?”

“Came to ask after Mana’s room. You?” Origami replied without shifting her gaze in the slightest.

“Oh, is that it? I came to see Mana, too.”

“You did. A visit?”

“W-well, yeah, I guess.”

“Just Mana?”

“Umm... And you, too, Origami.”

“You did,” she replied, her expression unchanging, of course. He wasn’t sure why, but he got the feeling she was very pleased. His conscience stung a bit. “So where’s Mana staying?” Origami asked.

“Uh... Oh. I guess she’s undergoing treatment, and she’s not allowed to have visitors. I was just asking if they couldn’t make an exception,” he explained.

“...They probably won’t budge on that, no matter how long you wait,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I can’t tell you the specifics, but she’s likely being treated using a highly confidential device. No one will be allowed to see her until she’s moved to the general wing. If you try to force it, you’ll be arrested.”

“...!”

Shido’s eyebrows shot up. A highly confidential device... Probably a medical Realizer. He was pretty sure Reine had said something about this hospital having them. The Realizer was a near-miraculous technology that made the

imagined real and was also the nation's most closely guarded secret. It was no surprise then that he was coming up against a wall with the receptionist.

"Okay. I'll try again another day."

Origami nodded and then didn't say another word...while staring into his eyes.

For a while, there was silence.

He knew he was blocking the hospital corridor, trapped in this deadlock, but it was like the right moment to slip away had passed by him, and now he was stuck there.

"Uh. Um. Origami?" he managed to say, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. "You okay not going back to your room?"

"I'll go back."

"O-oh yeah? Then I'll just be..." He was about to walk toward the exit when suddenly, Origami pitched forward like a plank of wood.

"O-Origami?! Are you okay?!"

He hurriedly crouched down, wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and lifted her up. Her nose and forehead were colored red, probably because she'd just slammed them into the floor.

The fall had been so ostentatious that the staff and patients in the area all turned to look at them in surprise. Origami seemed to pay no mind to the chatter that rose up around them as she turned her face toward Shido.

"Looks like I can't make it back by myself."

"..."

"Take me there."

"...Um."

"Take me there."

"O-okay," Shido agreed, giving up. "Do you think you can walk on your own, Origami?"

“Too hard.”

“...Oh yeah? Just wait here. I’ll go get a wheelchair.” Shido was about to stand up, but Origami grabbed on to the hem of his shirt. “Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want a wheelchair.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“I get terrible motion sickness.”

“...”

He had a few things he would have liked to say to her, like asking if she would really get motion sick in a wheelchair gliding along the flat hallways of the hospital. Or asking how an AST member could even say that when she was whipping around in a CR unit on a near daily basis. But he decided to hold his tongue.

“S-so what should I do?”

“Take me on piggyback.”

“Huh?” he said, stunned.

“On piggyback.”

“Uh. Um.”

“On piggyback.”

“...Okay.” Realizing that it was pointless to refuse, he turned his back toward her. Instantly, she nimbly sprang to her feet and pressed her body against his. She moved so quickly that it was hard to believe she had just collapsed from dizziness. He honestly felt like this was less piggyback and more like he’d been ambushed from behind.

“Hngh...” Shido had experience piggybacking Kotori to her room after she’d fallen asleep in the living room on an almost daily basis, so he thought he was used to carrying a girl around. But this did feel a little different.

Her body was a bit heavier than Kotori’s, and the particular softness of a girl came through loud and clear on his back. He also felt like the level of closeness was higher than strictly required.

“Origami? Y-you’re maybe holding on a little too tightly?”

“I’m not,” she insisted, as she squeezed him even more. Her breasts pressed firmly against his back, separated by only a thin hospital gown.

“Uh. Ngh!”

From an objective viewpoint, Origami was not so developed in that area. But when it came to this kind of close combat, she did possess fearsome powers of destruction. Feeling his face turn red, Shido shook his head from side to side to clear his mind and took the IV stand attached to Origami’s arm in one hand.



“S-so... Origami. Where’s your room?”

“West building, third floor. Room three-oh-five.”

“Okay... Got it.” He nodded and began to move, pulling the IV stand with one hand as he followed the signs and headed for the corridor connecting the central and west buildings.

“Eeeek?!” He shrieked like a girl just as he was about to enter the corridor. Origami’s fingers were wriggling around suspiciously and groping him like uncomfortable tongues. “O-Origami. That tickles...”

“Oh,” she said and stopped moving her fingers at last.

He let out a sigh of relief and started walking again.

Once they reached the west building, he took the elevator up to the third floor and followed Origami’s directions down the hallway. After a while, she started to play with the back of his head.

But her arms were still wrapped around his neck. He frowned, and then quickly realized what was going on. It was her audible breath on his neck.

“O-Origami...?!”

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

“Hey...”

Sniff. Sniff.

“I said, ‘hey’...!” He frowned and turned his head to look over his shoulder. “Eek?!”

He felt something race along his neck then, and he jumped into the air. It was a ticklish sensation, like she was caressing his brain stem, even though both of her hands were occupied.

“What?! What are you doing to me?!”

Shido managed to suppress his panic and confusion long enough to run into the designated Room 305 and toss Origami onto the bed.

“...”

She felt like a pro and licked her lips for some reason.

“Haah...! Haah...!” Shido panted. Although the trip hadn’t been that far and Origami wasn’t particularly heavy, he was exhausted. He leaned against the wall for a minute to calm his breathing.

Once the pounding of his heart was under control, he looked around. A private room in shades of white. In the ten-square-meter space, there were a bed, table, TV, and chair, and on top of the table, there were a vase of flowers and a basket with some apples, perhaps from a previous visitor.

“Um... So, Origami. I should, uh,” he started, and Origami’s stomach growled. “Have you not eaten?”

Origami bobbed her head up and down.

“You haven’t...? Maybe you should try calling the nurse?”

“...” Origami lifted her face and took one of the apples from the basket. She thrust it out at him, together with a paring knife. “Peel it.”

“Huh? Oh... Fine.” He had no reason to refuse her. He sat down on the nearby stool, took the apple and the knife, set the basket on his knees, and began to peel the skin.

He was in the kitchen and handled knives pretty much every day. Peeling an apple was a piece of cake. He had cut the fruit into eight pieces in less than a minute and set them out on a plate at hand.

“There. That good?” he asked, holding it out.

Origami shook her head, displeased.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Feed me.”

“Wha—?” Shido shuddered, plate still in his hand. But he couldn’t let himself be thrown by something like this. He cleared his throat. “Uh. Can’t you do that yourself?”

“The doctor said to refrain from excessive exercise.”

“But you were walking around and dragging that IV stand.”

Origami ignored him and opened her mouth. “Aaah.”

“Geez... Fine. You win.” With a sigh, he picked up a piece of apple and brought it to her mouth. He saw her eyebrows twitch up.

“If you could use your mouth instead of your—”

“...! Here!” He knew he couldn’t let her finish that sentence. He shoved the apple into her mouth to silence her.

Origami bit into the apple, staring at him, chewed it up, and swallowed it. And then she opened her mouth again, as if demanding the other half in Shido’s hand.

“Mm. Okay, here.”

When he held the apple out, she clamped her lips around it and his fingers.

“Gah?!” he cried out, stunned. This was indeed unexpected. “Ha-ha... You missed.”

He laughed lifelessly as he tried to pull his hand away, leaving only the apple in Origami’s mouth. Instantly, she grabbed his wrist and held it impossibly tight.

“Huh...? Huh?!” he yelped.

“...”

Origami ignored his panic and let her tongue crawl over his fingers, still holding on to his wrist. *Lick. Lick, lick. Lick, lick, lick. Slurp, slurp. Smack, smack. Shhrlp.*

“H-hey, Origami... Uh, this is, I mean, really, O-Oreeegahmee?!” he shrieked and jerked his hand back and forth.

At long last, she opened her mouth and set his hand free, lines of shining saliva stretching out to connect his fingers with her lips. Shido turned red at this incredibly obscene sight.

“Delicious.” Origami wiped her mouth before putting her hands together and bowing.

He felt hot under the collar as he wiped his hand. “Th-that’s enough, yeah?”

Origami pointed to the table. “And that.”

“Hmm?” He turned his eyes to see what she was pointing at. A simple electronic thermometer.

“I have to take my temperature.”

“Oh, you do?” He picked up the thermometer and held it out to her, but she did not reach out to take it. “Hmm? What’s wrong? Weren’t you going to take your temperature?”

“Too hard. I want you to help.”

“Uh?” He frowned. “N-no, no, no. You just have to put it under your armpit or something, though?”

“No excessive exercise.”

“...Fine. I get it. Okay.” He felt like he’d been expertly duped, but his back was against the wall. With a sigh, Shido pulled the thermometer out of its case. “But like... How am I supposed to help you take your temperature? There’s basically nothing for me to do.”

“Sit here.” Origami patted the bed.

“Huh? Okay...” Cocking his head to one side, Shido sat down as instructed, and Origami got up and installed herself in front of him...in the exact opposite position from the piggyback he’d given her before.

“O-Origami?” He tried to look anywhere but at the pale nape of her neck peeking out from beneath her hair a hot breath away from him.

Origami didn’t seem to care, however. She untied her hospital gown and with no fanfare whatsoever, opened it up to the front.

“...?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you doing, Origami?!”

“When Kurumi Tokisaki transferred to our school, you were more than a little excited by her conduct.”

“H-huh?”

“And so I determined that taking the lead would be effective,” Origami said, almost to herself, and took Shido’s hand with the thermometer. She slowly guided it to her side. “Put it in, Shido.”

“...?!”

“The thermometer.”

“Oh.” Even though her words themselves were nothing out of the ordinary, he felt incredibly embarrassed. “Th-that’s kind of...”

“If you can’t, you can help me wipe down my body and—”

“I’ll do it! I prefer the thermometer!”

“Oh.” She nodded, seeming the slightest bit deflated, and turned her face forward.

Shido gulped and slowly moved the thermometer toward her armpit with a shaking hand.

“...!” When the tip of the thermometer grazed her skin, she shuddered.

“A-are you okay, Origami?”

“Fine. It’s just a little cold.”

“O-oh...” He pulled himself together again and moved the instrument once more.

“...! Ah... Mmm!” Origami made a sound like a groan or a moan so quietly that he wouldn’t have been able to hear it if he hadn’t been so close.

She would never sigh so weakly or so fleetingly under normal circumstances. Each time these little whimpers reached his ears, his brain cells ascended to heaven in the thousands.

“Mm... Shido, deeper.”

“Uh. Um.”

“If you don’t put it...all the way in...it won’t...measure...properly.”

“R-right...” He was only taking her temperature, but for some reason, he felt like he was doing something he really shouldn’t be doing. It had to be all in his mind. Definitely, completely in his mind.

To calm himself, Shido chanted the Heart Sutra (although he mostly made up the words) as he pushed the thermometer all the way into Origami’s armpit.

“Mmm!” She shuddered and threw her head back. Then her breathing grew ragged.

“O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-Origami?”

“Hold me close.”

“Uh. Uhhh... Wh-why?”

“The thermometer will...slip out.”

“Oh... Um. Mm... Right.” As instructed, Shido really threw himself into the embrace to wedge the thermometer into Origami’s armpit.

Yes. If the thermometer fell out, it would read an error, so he had no other choice. He just had to do it. This was a fundamental principle of the vast universe, and an insignificant human being like Shido couldn’t possibly go against it.

He felt the soft warmth of Origami’s arms, chest, stomach—and a faint scent of sweat from her neck that tickled his nostrils, making him feel like someone opened his skull and scrambled his brains. He no longer knew what was what.

Then the thermometer made a cheerful beeping sound and brought Shido back to this world.

His drooping eyelids flew open, and he pulled the thermometer out from Origami’s armpit.

“Ah!” She shuddered again, but he tried his best not to think about that and looked at the numbers on the thermometer. “Thirty-six point two... It’s normal.”

“...Oh,” she said, sounding regretful somehow, and pulled the front of her gown closed with a lazy hand. Then she turned her head and looked at him. “Shido.”

“Wh-what?” he stammered.

“You were...incredibly good.”

“...! I—I—I—I was?” He had no idea what exactly he had been good at, but he got the feeling that he wouldn’t like the explanation, so he nodded. “O-okay... I’m going to head out now. Get better soon, Origami.”

He pulled away and took the long way around Origami to climb off the bed. Then he started to walk toward the door.

“One last thing,” Origami called out from behind him.

“...What?” he asked, a bad feeling sending a shiver up his spine. What demand was she going to make of him now?

But Origami surprised him.

“It’s about yesterday. I want you to tell me what happened after we fought Kurumi Tokisaki. Another Spirit appeared in the sky. A Spirit in a Japanese-style Astral Dress—one who controlled flames.”

“...” He gulped loudly. There was absolutely no doubt that Origami was talking about Kotori.

“Do you remember that?”

“...Y-yeah.” He nodded after a moment’s hesitation. He thought about maybe playing dumb, but given that Origami had seen Kotori, he decided there was no point in attempting that. If he said he didn’t know anything about a Spirit he had to have seen, that ran the risk of making her suspicious of him.

Whether Origami noticed Shido’s nervousness or not, she continued with composure. “Kurumi Tokisaki knocked me unconscious soon after that. I want you to tell me anything you noticed about that fire Spirit. No detail is too trivial.”

“Oh... Uh. Like. I actually passed out pretty quick, too, so I don’t really know.”

“Oh.” She let out a short, disappointed sigh. “If you do remember anything, I want you to tell me right away.”

“S-sure.” He bowed and frowned. Something wasn’t quite right here.

Origami was a member of the Self-Defense Forces Anti-Spirit Team. It was her job to defeat Spirits. So it was natural that she would want to know about a new Spirit. However, he couldn’t quite put it into words, but the way she asked seemed just a bit different from usual somehow.

“Why do you want to know about that Spirit so badly?”

“Because.” Origami stopped for a moment and bit her lip before continuing.
“Do you remember what I told you before?”

“Before?”

“About my parents being killed by a Spirit.”

“...! Oh. Yeah, I remember.” He nodded. How could he have forgotten? It was the reason why Origami hated the Spirits, those world-killing catastrophes.

“Five years ago. A Spirit caused a large fire in the Nanko residential area in Tengu and burned my mother and father to ash before my eyes. It was that Spirit who controls flames.”

“Wha—?” Shido was speechless.

He felt like a hand had reached down his throat to squeeze his internal organs. It became harder and harder to breathe, and a violent desire to vomit pushed up from the depths of his stomach.

He took a deep breath and let it out again. He thought about what Origami had said. When he replayed her words, however, he couldn’t find any confusion or inconsistencies. She had definitely said that the Spirit of flames had killed her parents.

That *Kotori* had killed her parents.

“I’ve been looking for her forever. I’ve been searching all this time,” Origami continued, seeming not to notice Shido’s bewilderment. “I finally found her.

“At last, I found her. I’ll kill her. Kill her. I *will* kill her. With my own hands.

“That’s what these five years have been about.

“I joined the AST for this moment.

“I got a Realizer for this moment.

“I learned techniques and tools for this moment.

“All of it to defeat the criminal.

“All of it to strike the flame Spirit.

“All of it to kill Efreet.”

She laid out the words of her curse with an eloquence that was impossible to imagine from her usual demeanor. Her expression was dull, her voice flat. She wasn't gesturing wildly, and yet there was a strong, deep resentment in her words that would leave anyone listening gasping for air.

Efreet. That was probably the code name given to Kotori as a Spirit.

And five years ago. That did line up with what Kotori had said.

"But that's—you can't... She's—," he protested.

"Do you know something?" Origami cocked her head to one side.

Shido gasped and shook his head. "N-no... That's not what I was saying."

"Oh." She lowered her eyes, which had been trained on Shido.

Instantly, he felt all the tension run out of him like he had been released from an invisible cell. But he couldn't let the conversation end there. "O-Origami," he ventured to say.

"What?"

"If it's too hard to talk about, that's okay... But maybe you could tell me a little more about this Spirit from five years ago. I-it might help me remember something..."

She nodded a tiny bit. "On that day, when I came home from grocery shopping—"

Origami spoke in a quiet voice. About how her parents were alive at first amid the flames. How the Spirit appeared and killed them before her very eyes. How she couldn't really see the Spirit properly because her mind was hazy and her vision blurry. How she later learned about the Spirit that was the cause of this fire, Efreet.

Even though it all happened five years earlier, she didn't falter once. It almost sounded like she'd only gone through all this the other day.

"...!"

Shido felt his heart pounding excessively loudly. She still hadn't told him the thing he desperately wanted to hear—some definitive difference between this

Spirit and Kotori. He couldn't actually believe that *his* Kotori had killed Origami's parents.

"And that's that," Origami finished, without giving Shido the confirmation he had hoped for.

He turned toward her and took a step forward as if imploring her. Something. One thing—he didn't care what. He just wanted proof that Kotori hadn't done this.

"N-nothing else?" he asked. "Nothing similar to the Spirit you saw yesterday —?"

"Attention, visitors. Visiting hours have ended for the day. All visitors are asked to please make your way to the exit. I repeat..."

The announcement came in from the hallway and drowned Shido out.

"What were you saying?" Origami looked at him, expecting Shido to repeat himself.

But he quietly shook his head. "N-no. It's nothing. Get better soon, Origami."

She nodded, and he hurried to make his way out of her room before she said anything else to stop him.

Although visiting hours were over, he probably had a few minutes' leeway before someone came and herded him to the exit, but he couldn't bring himself to ask his question again. The announcement had killed his momentum, true. He knew that wasn't the whole of it, though.

He was scared—terrified that Origami would say something that actually proved that the Spirit five years ago was Kotori.

"..." He closed the door as quietly as possible, dropped his gaze to the floor, and began to walk.

This was a hospital hallway. Walking too quickly could pose danger and was not permitted. His pace naturally quickened, however, as if to release the thoughts that had nowhere to go. He pressed a hand to his chest to try and suppress the wild pounding of his heart as his footfalls echoed around him.

"...!"

The phone that vibrated in his pocket stopped his feet on their march toward the exit. He had forgotten to turn it off when he entered the hospital. He hurriedly stepped outside, pulled the phone from his pocket, and pressed the answer button.

"Hello?"

"...Hello? Shin?"

"Reine?" He had been in too much of a hurry to check the screen before he answered, but the sleepy voice and nickname told him exactly who it was. It had been quite some time since they met, but Reine still was getting Shido's name wrong.

"...Yes. Are you done with your visit to Mana?"

"Oh. Yeah. I mean, sort of."

"...? That's not really an answer."

"Um, the truth is, she's in treatment and isn't allowed to have any visitors."

"...Hmm, she is?" Reine groaned.

"? Is that a problem?"

"...No, it's fine. Anyway, Shin, can you maybe come back to Fraxinus now? It's about Kotori."

"...!" He held his breath. He had been shaken by how Kotori looked when he saw her before leaving *Fraxinus* earlier, and with what Origami had just told him, he felt his insides twist around. "D-did something happen with Kotori?!"

"...No. After some discussion, we've decided to hold a strategy meeting."

"A strategy meeting?" he asked, frowning.

"...Yes," Reine replied. *"...Shin, you said it would be hard for you to make Kotori weak in the knees...but you do have a big advantage that you didn't have with Tohka or Yoshino."*

"I do?"

"...Mm-hmm. It's very simple. Unlike a Spirit that appears out of nowhere, this target has spent years with us. Her preferences, likes, dislikes, favorite places,

things she wants...et cetera, et cetera—we have all this information. And on a level that doesn't even begin to compare with the other Spirits. There's no way this won't prove useful."

"Y-you're right."

Now that she mentioned it, that was exactly it. True, Kotori in commander mode was more difficult to handle than pretty much anyone else, but if they only looked at the personal data they'd already amassed, then she was nothing compared to the other Spirits. In that sense, she might have been the easiest Spirit to come up with countermeasures for.

"...So we're gathering the crew members who know Kotori best to discuss the plan for your date in two days. I thought it would be great if you could join, too, Shin."

If that was the case, he could hardly say no. He nodded. "Understood. I don't know how helpful I'll be, but I'm happy to do what I can."

"...Great. Fraxinus will pick you up. Can you go back to your house?"

"Okay, got it. And, Reine?"

"...Hmm? What's up?"

"Um. About the thing five years ago. Kotori..."

"Kotori what?" Reine asked.

Shido couldn't put the rest of the words together. Maybe it was that his thoughts were muddled, and he didn't know how to phrase the question. Or maybe he hesitated to even put a question like that to Reine, Kotori's subordinate and good friend.

"...It's nothing."

"...? Yeah? Okay. See you later," Reine said and hung up.

Shido silently pressed the end button, shoved his phone back into his pocket, and began treading forward with heavy feet.



"Shido!"

When Shido was brought to the ship with *Fraxinus's* transport device, Reine and Tohka—both dressed in the same military uniform—were waiting for him.

“Oh! Tohka! You’re awak—”

Tohka leaped at him without waiting for him to finish his sentence.

“Wh-whoa!” He stiffened in surprise.

Tohka paid no mind to this as she wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed tightly. “Mm! Shido! So you’re okay! That’s great!”

“Mm... Thanks to you.” He struggled to breathe and patted her shoulder to get her to let go of him.

“Mm,” she said and was about to pull away, having intuited his intent. “Hmm?” She furrowed her brow doubtfully and brought her face close to his neck once more. She twitched her nose, sniffing around.

“Wh-what? Is something wrong, Tohka?”

“Oh... I thought I smelled something yucky,” Tohka said, scowling. “I don’t know what... It’s like I was expecting to smell something good, but then just sniffing it made me all grumpy or, like, angry... Oh, that’s it! It smells like Origami Tobiichi.”

What an incredible sense of smell! Shido’s heart nearly beat out of his chest. “...! M-m-maybe it’s just in your mind...?”

“Mm... Maybe. I guess. Is there something wrong with me? I mean, why would I be smelling Origami Tobiichi on *you*, Shido? Her scent wouldn’t get on you unless you were, like, giving her a piggyback ride or something.”

“...! R-right. And there’s no way that happened.”

“...Maybe we should get going, Shin?” Reine spoke up, head gently wobbling, as she watched Shido and Tohka from the side. As usual, she looked sleepy, or more like she would collapse at any second.

“Oh... Sure. Sorry.”

“...Mm. Then follow me. Tohka, maybe you could play with Yoshino for a bit?”

“Hmm? Can’t I go with Shido?” Tohka looked up at him, her eyebrows knitted

together.

He felt a stab in his heart, but there was no way they could let Tohka attend a meeting on how to make Kotori fall for him. “Sorry, Tohka. I’ve got a thing to take care of.”

“Mm... Fine.” Tohka acquiesced, even as she pursed her lips in a pout, and slowly walked away.

“...Okay. Let’s get going,” Reine said and staggered away. Shido followed her.

They went a route he’d never been before and arrived at a large door. When Reine stood in front of it, there was a beep, and the door slid open automatically.

“...Go on in.” She stood by the side of the door and urged him to go ahead.

The space inside was large. In the center of the room, there was a round table with several crew members already seated around it. This was apparently the strategy meeting room.

“...Go on and take a seat wherever.” Reine tottered forward like a ghost and plunked herself down in an empty seat.

Following her lead, Shido sat next to her. He looked down to see a small LCD and a keyboard. It seemed that simple consoles had been set up at every seat.

The man seated next to him cleared his throat and got to his feet. His hair reached down to his back, and he had a chiseled face that was quite un-Japanese. A tall man looking like something out of an old shojo manga.

Kyouhei Kannazuki, deputy captain of the airship *Fraxinus* and vice commander of Ratatoskr operations. With Kotori held in isolation, he was now in charge, for all intents and purposes.

“Thank you all for coming. With the urgent situation, I, Kannazuki, will take the lead here on behalf of our commander. Shido, I would be happy if you could join us for a little while.”

“Yes, of course.”

Kannazuki nodded, satisfied, before continuing. “Then, let us get straight to the main agenda. I know some of you have known for a while about the

situation with the commander, while others are new to this knowledge. But I look forward to cooperation from you all.

“Our agenda today is to create a plan for the date between Commander Itsuka and Shido two days hence. We will each present what information we have so we might create a day that will delight the commander from the bottom of her heart.” Kannazuki looked around at the crew assembled in the room before taking a deep breath.

“...Shin. Cover your ears,” Reine warned.

“Huh?” Shido looked at her, confused.

“Now, people. Dear personnel of Ratatoskr. This affair with our beloved goddess is serious business. It is time to repay our daily blessings. To the commander! To Commander Kotori Itsuka!” Kannazuki shouted in a voice that carried. “She needs our help! Do you have the spirit to meet that need?!”

““Aye!”” The crew around the table raised their voices in response. The roar shook the air and reverberated off the walls to assault Shido’s eardrums.

“Wh-what?!” he cried in confusion.

“Do you wish the commander to praise you?!” Kannazuki continued.

““Aye!””

“Do you wish to see the commander smile?!”

““Aye!””

“Do you wish to be kicked right on your heinie with the heel of her boot after being made to crawl on all fours?!”

““A...ye?””

It seemed that this did not obtain agreement. Kannazuki cleared his throat.

“Now is the time! We must show our love! Sing her name!”

““KO-TO-RI!

““KO-TO-RI!

““L-O-V-E KO-TO-RI!””

The briefing room was ablaze with passion. This wasn't so much a superior officer issuing commands or subordinates asking questions as it was something from an idol's concert.

"Excellent!" Kannazuki declared. "Now begin the reports! We shall fulfill our commander's hopes, her desires, her everything, and make her weak in the knees!"

"“Yeaaaah!”" The crew began to tap at the consoles before them and flip through the materials they had brought.

"Wh-what was that?" Shido shook his head slightly, his ears still ringing.

"...What? Everyone loves Kotori," Reine replied.

"Uh-huh...", he said, a trail of sweat sliding down his cheek.

Someone spoke from the opposite side of the round table. The voice belonged to a lean man whose hair was starting to gray. Shido was pretty sure his name was "Boss" Mikimoto.

"Vice Commander! Me first!"

"Excellent!" Kannazuki cried. "Permission to speak granted!"

"Yessir! The most essential element is presents! Given that we know her likes, we can say that this is easier to understand than with a regular Spirit! As we all know, the commander's favorite candy is Chupa Chups! What if we were to create an original flavor and present it to her?!"

"*Non!*" Kannazuki snapped. "We haven't the time for that! Do you honestly believe we can transcend the commander's Chupa love with knowledge on the level of what we possess?! Pay mind! The most difficult present to give is that which the receiver already loves!"

"...! M-my sincerest apologies!"

"Next!"

"Yessir!" Another crew member stood up. "Dimension Breaker" Nakatsugawa. "According to information from the commander's junior high school friend, Kana Saotome, she has recently been devoted to a phone app to raise a pig—"

“Hey! Where did you get that information?!” Shido shouted, outraged.

Nakatsugawa smiled with great satisfaction and snapped a thumbs-up at him. “No need for concern. I paid her quite handsomely to stay quiet about this. And so that she would not learn of our existence in Ratatoskr, I made sure to play the part of a pervert stalker obsessed with Kotori!”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?!” Shido moaned.

“Haah... Haah... Hey, little girl? Are you friends with that girl you were walking with earlier? I-I’ll give you some pocket money if you tell me all about her.”

“Grossssss!” Shido yelped. “And, like, Kana sold her friend out to a creep like you?!”

“It seems her mother is quite ill, and she needed the money. She made the decision to do this after a lot of time spent hesitating. She still wets her pillow with tears of regret.”

“Sorry, Kana, for involving you in our business!” Shido cradled his head in his hands.

“Vice Commander, if I may?” A middle-aged man stood up next. “Bad Marriage” Kawagoe.

“I have high hopes from you.”

“Sir! Please take a look at this. It’s video from May second.” Kawagoe tapped some buttons on his console, and video from the bridge was displayed on the monitor in the middle of the round table.

Kotori was sitting in the captain’s chair. It looked like she was just finishing up some tasks. She stretched and rubbed a shoulder as she opened her mouth.

“...Phew, I’m beat. I wish I could go to the hot springs and just relax.”

““...!”” The assembled crew began to chatter.

“Th-the hot springs...”

“Yessir! The commander did indeed say this. And so this is my proposal,” Kawagoe began, and the image on the monitor switched to a traditional hot springs resort hotel. “Delivering a moment of total Zen. To refresh body and

soul and free yourself! Tsukimigahara Hot Springs! A four-night package! Natural hot spring water flows from its underground source and is sure to take the tension out of the commander's shoulders and heart."

"I-interesting!"

"And that is not all. Albeit with time restrictions, at this resort...there is mixed bathing!" Kawagoe declared.

""Wha—?"" Once again, a shiver of excitement ran through the room.

Kawagoe threw his arms out with a maniacal grin. "After an extensive investigation, I have learned that the last time the commander bathed with Shido was five years ago!"

"H-h-how do you even know that?!" Shido shouted and was magnificently ignored.

"Although they are brother and sister and normally unaware of each other as man and woman," Kawagoe continued passionately, "by bathing together again after such a long time, Shido will notice his sister's surprising maturity, and the commander, too, will have mysterious feelings about her brother's body! A pounding of the heart that betrays reason. Each time skin touches skin, they are made aware of each other once more! Naturally, we will double the usual number of cameras to record this scene!"

""Wh-whoa!"" The crew grew excited. Although there were several female crew members present, for some reason, they began to breathe heavily with excitement as well. Almost as if this had been their objective all along.

"And then the final night comes for them. This delightful sojourn must come to an end at last. The commander will muster up her courage and say, '...Hmph. I guess I could let you sleep with me just for today.'"

""...! ...!"" The crew twisted around as if in agony.

"With neither starting it, their hands touch, and body joins body. And then lips touch lips! Aah! Congratulations, Commander! Congratulations!" Kawagoe covered his eyes.

When Shido looked closely, he saw that he was crying. And it wasn't just

Kawagoe. All the crew around the table except for Reine were moved beyond reason and had tears in their eyes.

“Shido... Be good to the commander...”

“Please make her happy.”

“Ah, ah, ah...”

Several damp gazes turned on him.

“Uh, that’s a whole thing...” Shido picked at his skin, dumbfounded.

“Such a half-hearted response! And you call yourself a man?!”

“That’s right! Stand up and take responsibility!”

“We can’t give our commander to a man like this!”

They all sounded like Kotori’s father now. Shido frowned and put a hand to his forehead.

Kannazuki clapped his hands to get the room under control again. “No, but his plan is wonderful! A Saint Kotori for you!”

“Thank you so much!” Kawagoe pounded a fist into the palm of his hand and bowed his head.

“Um, what’s a Saint Kotori?” Shido asked Reine in a quiet voice, as he watched all this.

“...A button badge Kannazuki made using a picture of Kotori.”

“...I see.” This wasn’t an award that was particularly worth wanting.

The crew nodded at one another as if the plan was half-settled already.

“...But I wonder if four days will be too much for Kotori,” Reine said.

““...Oh.”” The crew’s jaws dropped, and they looked at one another. And then they frowned at the same time.

“Mm. Hmm. Now that you mention it. Can we make it a shorter trip?”

“No! This plan will only succeed if they toe the distance between them for the previous days, which will act as the trigger for that final night!” Kawagoe shouted.

“...And I feel like Kotori’s actions on that final night are closer to a hope than a plan,” Reine added.

““Ah...!”” Everyone gasped, as if they had only realized this once Reine pointed it out.

“Ngh! In that case, what should we do...?” Kannazuki groaned in anguish.

Reine let out a small sigh. “...Well, I don’t really think we need to make it more difficult than we have to.”

“M-meaning?”

“...Shin, is there anywhere Kotori mentioned wanting to go?”

“Somewhere she wants to go?” he asked.

“...Mm-hmm. Instead of someplace you heard about from someone else or from eavesdropping on her, a place she mentioned knowing that you could hear her would be ideal. The best location would be somewhere she specifically asked you to take her.”

“U-uh...” Shido put a hand to his chin. Somewhere that Kotori had pestered him to take her... “Um... Oh, I know! I don’t know when it was, but I feel like she told me to take her to Eibu Ocean Park after seeing a commercial for it.”

“...Mm. She did? Then wouldn’t that be good?” Reine said, nodding.

“W-would it?” he asked. “I mean, she did say that, but it wasn’t in commander mode, you know? She was in sister mode.”

“...Doesn’t matter. It’s not like she has a totally separate personality like Yoshino,” Reine replied. “In fact, that’s when she’s displaying her true feelings, so this might be the perfect situation.”

“Uh-huh...”

Kannazuki frowned, troubled. “Ocean Park? Well, that is a spot typical for dates, but we can’t exactly declare the matter settled without indicating a clear course of action.”

The other crew members seemed to be of the same opinion as Kannazuki. The corners of their mouths were turned down, and they looked unlikely to

agree to this.

“...If we do Ocean Park, you’ll be able to see Kotori looking adorable in her bathing suit,” Reine remarked.

““ ...!””

Shido heard them all gasp. It seemed like it would be surprisingly simple to settle on a plan for a date that held the fates of Kotori and Ratatoskr.

Chapter 8

Swimwear Battle

The following day, June 10, was a Saturday.

It was the weekend, but that didn't even matter since Raizen High School, which Shido and his friends attended, was temporarily shut down. Not that it came as a surprise. All of the students and faculty in the school had collapsed and temporarily lost consciousness, after all.

Fortunately, no one was seriously injured, but just in case, the school's gas pipes were being carefully inspected, and the school would remain closed for the rest of the week.

"...Well, I guess that's a good thing..." Shido let out a sigh as he locked the door to his house.

"...Okay. It's almost ten. We've transferred Yoshino to the roof of the apartment building. She should be arriving there shortly," Reine's sleepy voice suddenly echoed in his right ear.

She was nowhere near him. There was only the small, inconspicuously equipped earpiece.

Shido had been ordered to train for his date with Kotori the following day.

"And what are we training today anyway?" he asked, lightly touching his ear. "No one's told me yet." He had only been told to meet up with Tohka and Yoshino in front of his house this morning.

"...Oh yeah. Once Tohka gets there, head for Tengu Station. You're going to the fourth floor of the B wing of the Twin Building... I want you to have them choose swimsuits."

"S-swimsuits?!" He furrowed his brow. His eyes naturally shifted to the right, to where the voice was coming from. Swimsuits for Tohka and Yoshino. Just

those words brought heat to his cheeks.

“...Yes, swimsuits. I gave you money yesterday, right? That should be plenty to cover them.”

“Oh. Th-that part’s fine,” he stammered. “But why swimsuits?”

“...Shin. You’re going to Ocean Park with Kotori tomorrow. We need to get your eyes used to girls in swimsuits so you won’t be nervous,” Reine told him, sounding like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Uh, Reine?” Shido rolled his eyes. “Even *I’m* not going to get nervous at my little sister in a swimsuit.”

“...I don’t know. Well, even if you don’t, you might as—actually, you know what? It’s precisely because you won’t get nervous that you need this training. Kotori won’t be the only girl at Ocean Park. We’d be in real trouble if your eyes wandered to some other girl in the middle of your date.”

“...”

He was about to insist that wouldn’t happen, but given that his cheeks had flushed mere seconds ago at just the thought of girls in swimsuits, he wasn’t really one to talk. He pursed his lips and then agreed with a sigh. “Fine... I understand.”

While they were talking, he heard footfalls from behind him. It was probably Tohka or Yoshino coming out of the apartment building. Shido raised a hand in a wave and looked back.

“Hey, morni—”

And then he froze in place. He saw neither Tohka nor Yoshino, but rather Origami Tobiichi in a comfortable T-shirt and skirt.

“O-Origami?”

“...” She nodded wordlessly.

“What are you doing here? I don’t usually see you up in this ar—,” he started and then gasped. He covered his mouth in a natural kind of way so that Origami wouldn’t notice anything was up and quietly asked his earpiece, “Reine? Is this maybe your doing, too?”

“...No. Or at least, I don’t know anything about it.”

“Y-you don’t...” He slid his hand from his mouth to his cheek and scratched it before turning his gaze back on Origami. “Anyway, how are you doing? You were just in the hospital yesterday.”

“My injuries were nothing serious,” she told him. “I was examined after you left and discharged.”

“You were? ...That’s great. Um... What about Mana?” Shido asked, and he thought Origami’s eyebrows moved ever so slightly.

“She’s still not conscious. If Mana was awake, then maybe I wouldn’t have had to come here. But fine. I’m very fortunate to be able to see you.”

“Huh? What do you—?”

“Shido!”

“Heyooo! Were ya waiting long?”

He was interrupted by shouts from the apartment complex next to the Itsukas’ house. He turned his eyes toward it and saw Tohka standing there in a pale tank top and skirt, together with Yoshino in a skirt with suspenders.

“Mm?” With a broad smile on her face, Tohka’s eyebrows shot up when she noticed the girl standing next to Shido. Her expression slowly turned wary. “Origami Tobiiichi! What are you doing here?!” She almost growled at Origami as she raced over to put herself between her and Shido.

Origami didn’t flinch in the face of this threat. Instead, she glanced toward Yoshino. “Hermit? Why are you here?”

“...!” Yoshino jumped in fear. Her experience being chased down by the AST might have had lingering aftereffects, or she might have simply been afraid of Origami’s cool gaze.

“Yeah, yeah, little lady,” the puppet on her left hand quickly interjected as if to protect Yoshino. *“You mind not picking on Yoshino here? And if you keep scowling, you’re gonna get a whole lotta wrinkles when you’re older.”*

Origami didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow at this challenge and turned her gaze back on Shido. “What is this?”

“Uh. Oh. Um,” he stammered and averted his eyes. Now that he was thinking about it, this might have been the first time Origami and Yoshino had come face-to-face since Yoshino’s Spirit powers were sealed away.

Origami had yet to accept Tohka. And now she was up against another Spirit. She must have found this suspicious. But that said, he couldn’t exactly tell her about Ratatoskr.

“...Annoying. Throw her off somehow,” Reine instructed him vaguely.

“S-somehow?” Shido frowned.

“D-don’t ignore me!” Tohka flapped her hands in frustration at the conversation proceeding around her. “I asked you exactly what business you have here!”

Origami glanced at Yoshino before sighing and looking at Tohka. “Tohka Yatogami. I have something to ask you.”

“What?” Tohka frowned. Shido hadn’t expected Origami to say that, either. He had simply assumed that she wanted something from him. “What’s this thing you want to ask?”

“Two days ago. Do you remember the Spirit clad in flames that appeared in the sky?”

“...!”

It wasn’t Tohka who gasped at Origami’s question but Shido.

Now he got it. There had been five of them on the roof when Kotori showed up: Shido, Origami, Mana, Kurumi, and Tohka. He should have anticipated that Origami would set her sights on Tohka as a last possibility.

“R-Reine!” Shido called into his earpiece, frowning. This was not good. Tohka had been on the scene when Kotori appeared. It was plenty possible that she had seen the Spirit’s face.

“...Calm down, Shin. Things are never that simple.”

“B-but—” Listening to the loud pounding of his heart, Shido looked back at Origami and Tohka. Maybe he should stop Tohka from saying anything, though that would just make Origami suspicious. But like this...

“Hmph!” Tohka crossed her arms and puffed up her cheeks, sulking. “Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell *you*!”

Shido exhaled with relief, amazed that the fact that they didn’t get along would come in handy.

“...”

That wasn’t the end of it, however. Origami stood there for a while silently, no expression on her face, and then took a step back and lowered her head. “Please.”

“Wha—?” Shido’s eyes grew wide at this unexpected development. Origami bowing to Tohka!

Tohka appeared equally stunned. Her eyes widened, and she shook her head back and forth, unsettled. “S-stop it! What exactly is your game here?!”

“I want you to tell me about the flame Spirit. Please.”

“F-fine! I get it! Lift your head! It’s creepy!” Tohka practically shouted.

Origami swiftly returned her head to its original position. “So?”

“Mmph. The flame Spirit, right? Yeah, I saw her.”

So Tohka had seen Kotori then. Shido felt his whole body tense.

“That was... She was, hmm, yeah, red.”

“And?” Origami stared at Tohka silently.

“Mm? And... Oh, right! She was strong!”

“That’s it?”

“Nn. Umm... She was like, *bwoof*!”

“...” Once again, Origami was silent briefly before opening her mouth again. “Useless.”

“Wh-what did you say?!” Tohka cried. “I went to the trouble of actually telling you, and *that’s* your attitude?!”

“I was a fool to have expected a shred of anything from you. A fixed camera or a voice recorder is worth more than your existence in this world.”

“After you made me go through all the trouble of explaining...!”

“O-okay, whoa, calm down.” Shido patted Tohka’s shoulder, secretly breathing a sigh of relief.

Tohka still looked angry, but she quietly obeyed him and fell silent, pursing her lips in a pout.

“By the way, what are you all doing?” Origami asked, looking at Shido, Tohka, and Yoshino.

“Hmph.” Tohka sniffed. “Like anyone would tell you that they’re getting Shido to buy them a swimsuit!”

“You’re going to buy swimsuits?” Origami turned her eyes on Shido.

“Uh,” he said. “Well. Um...I guess.”

“Oh.” Origami turned on her heel and walked off in the direction from which she’d come. After she had gone a few steps, she stopped and clapped her hands rather deliberately.

“Now that you mention it, I only have my school swimsuit,” she mentioned, placing a hand on her forehead and shaking her head in a ridiculously theatrical manner. “I would be in an extremely difficult situation in the event where I needed to go to the pool or the beach.”

When Shido said nothing, Origami glanced back at him. “An extremely difficult situation.”

“...Umm.” He scratched his cheek, feeling *himself* to be in an extremely difficult situation.

“...Shin. Give up. Ask her to come, too,” Reine said in his ear.

“I-is that okay, though? Like with Tohka? And Yoshino?”

“...You don’t have a choice. If you ignore her, she’ll probably just follow you anyway. And, well, it’s not actually a bad idea to increase the number of girls in the sample.”

“Unh...” He felt hot again. He could easily imagine that scene.

Then he sighed and looked at Origami, who was still in her dramatically

troubled pose. “Why don’t you come with us, Origami?”

“Sure,” she agreed and whirled back around.

“Wha—?!” Tohka jumped up. “Wh-why, Shido?! It was supposed to be only me and you and Yoshino and Yoshinon today! Why does Origami Tobiichi—of all people—have to come?!”

“O-okay, don’t get so angry. It’s just, she needs a suit, too.”

“Nngh... Maybe, but that’s not my problem.” Tohka gritted her teeth, looking very much opposed to the whole idea.

Origami nodded, keeping her cool. “If you hate it that much, then fine. I won’t come with you.”

“Wh-what did you say?!” Tohka narrowed her eyes, surprised at this unprecedented submission.

Origami skipped over to Shido on light feet, took his hand, and started to walk briskly away. A heartbeat later, Tohka gasped.

“W-wait! What are you doing?!”

“I’m going with Shido to buy a swimsuit. You can go with Hermit.”

“Why would you come to that conclusion?!”

“You said you didn’t want to go with me. So there’s no other way.”

“Wha—? That’s different! That’s not what I meant!” Tohka shouted.

Origami yanked on Shido’s hand, and he was dragged along behind her.

“Shido! You—! Hey, let go of his hand!”

“But then that would mean you and I would be going shopping together.”

“I-it would?!” Tohka asked, bewildered.

“Yes.” Origami nodded with confidence. “It would be an unalterable fact.”

“Hnnngh,” Tohka groaned and then said, slowly, “F-fine. You can come, too, so let go of Shido!”

“Oh. I don’t want to.”

“...?!” Tohka looked stunned.

“You want to come along? What do you say?” Origami asked.

“Wha...? Wha...?” Tohka looked back and forth between Shido and Origami as if she could not comprehend what was happening.

“That’s fine.” Origami took a step forward, dragging Shido behind her. “I’ll go with just Shido then.”

“H-hey! P-please!” Tohka shouted. “I’m asking nicely! Take me along, too!”

Origami abruptly loosened her grip and fixed her gaze on Tohka. She parted soft lips. “No.”

“Wha—?!” Tohka’s eyes flew open. She looked like she was about to cry.

“...Don’t.” Shido rolled his eyes and sighed. He had seen this coming indeed.

In the end, it was decided that Origami would also come shopping.

On the way, things were stormy between her and Tohka. When he thought about it, however, this was no different from the usual grind at school. They got into the elevator of the Twin Building B wing in front of Tengu Station, and he pushed the button for their destination floor.

Since some schools were in session on Saturdays, there were fewer shoppers than usual, and it was just Shido and his entourage in the elevator.

“Anyway, Shido!” Tohka tilted her head as the elevator motor began to rumble.

“Hmm?” He glanced over at her. “What?”

“What exactly is a swimsuit?”

“Huh?” Shido asked, eyes wide as saucers. But now that she mentioned it, it hadn’t been pool season for gym class just yet. It was maybe no wonder she didn’t know. That said, it was a little embarrassing to explain to a girl what a swimsuit was. He averted his gaze slightly. “Mm. Right. A swimsuit is—”

“S-w-i-m-s-u-i-t. A new weapon for the annihilation of Spirits. When activated, the onboard Realizer commences parallel world operation and analyzes the warhead on a molecular level. The warhead is then launched and easily slips

through the Astral Dress to utterly destroy the target's physical structure to the level at which recovery is impossible," Origami explained without missing a beat. "The pain it causes is beyond description. International law prohibits personal use for the reason that it is simply too inhumane."

"Eep!" Tohka gasped. "Wha—? I-is that true, Shido?!"

"No, of course n—" He tried to correct this, but Origami interrupted him once again.

"It's true. I had no idea he was aware of the existence of s-w-i-m-s-u-i-t—swimsuit."

"Wh-why would Shido—?"

"The reason is exceptionally obvious and simple," Origami said. "Anti-Spirit annihilation weapons are only for use on Spirits. I'm sure he was planning a surprise attack the moment you two let your guard down."

"...!" Tohka turned pale and stiffened up, while Yoshino gasped and hid behind Shido. "D-don't lie! Shido would never do anything like that!"

"...! I... I...think...so, too..." Yoshino, who rarely raised her voice, followed Tohka's lead.

"R-right, Shido?!" Tohka demanded.

Shido was about to agree when Origami grabbed his nose and moved his lips.

"No, Origami's right. I was thinking I'd kill you girls one of these days."

"Y-you can't be serious, Shido!"

"That didn't sound anything like me! Don't be fooled by that!" Shido shouted.

Tohka shuddered and gasped. She had apparently only just realized she'd been deceived. Her cheeks turned red with anger or embarrassment, and she squared her jaw. "You dirty cheater, Origami Tobiichi! You tricked me!"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Origami's face was as expressionless as always.

"Both of you, be quiet in the store, okay?" Shido said. The two girls started to bicker with him in the middle yet again, and he sighed as he attempted to pacify

them. However used to this he might have been, it was still exhausting.

“A swimsuit is just like the word says: a suit you wear when you get in the water to go swimming,” he explained in simple terms.

Tohka reined in her hostility toward Origami for the moment and looked at him questioningly. “Get in the water...? You have to go to all the trouble of changing clothes just for that?”

“Yup.” He nodded. “It feels pretty uncomfortable when your clothes are soaked, right?”

“Oh! I get it!” She grinned. “Shido, you’re like a genius, you know?”

“I didn’t invent them or anything.” He winced, visibly uncomfortable.

A colorful space with swimsuits lined up came into view as soon as they got out of the elevator. It was already the end of June, the biggest sale of the season for swimwear.

“...Well, it took us a while to get there, but we’re at the starting line now. Get them to try on a bunch of suits,” Reine reminded him, breaking her long silence. *“...I’ll leave the choices to you. Just make sure you don’t stand and stare or get all confused at them looking hot. The important thing is to keep your cool.”*

“...Roger,” Shido said and stepped into the swimsuit sales area with Tohka and the others.

“Welcome!” came the high-pitched call of a clerk from somewhere in the department.

Tohka was the first to run in. She looked around curiously. “So, Shido. Which one is a swimsuit?”

“All of the ones hanging here are swimsuits,” he told her.

“Wh-what...?” Her eyes grew wide, and her hands trembled. Ever so timidly, she picked up a one-piece suit and scrutinized it, stroking the fabric as if to check the feel, and then she lifted her face abruptly as though she had just realized something. “I see. I get it. So you wear something on top of this, right?”

“No... Just that,” Shido said, scratching the back of his head.

The face she turned toward him was colored with fear. “B-but you can’t completely hide your body with this! Why does it have so little surface area?!”

“Oh. Well... Because it’s easier to move in the water that way, I guess?”

“Nngh. That might be the case. But this is almost like Origami Tobiichi’s whatever suit, isn’t it? It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“...” Origami sent a pointed gaze at Tohka. It wasn’t as though she said anything, but he got the feeling somehow that she was indignant.

“...Well, anyway, get them to try some on,” Reine urged through his earpiece.

Shido tapped it to indicate his understanding and got the three girls in his field of view. “W-well... Anyway, try on whatever ones you like.”

Origami immediately bobbed her head up and down, while Yoshino nodded, embarrassed.

Tohka’s cheeks colored. “...If it’s for you.” Then she clenched her hands into fists, turned toward Yoshino, and took on a fighting pose. “All right! Time for battle, Yoshino!”

“Uh. Um. Please...be...gentle,” Yoshino replied quietly.

“Battle?” Shido cocked his head to one side. “You’re going to battle now?”

“Mm.” Tohka nodded. “I guess they’ll give whoever makes your heart pound fastest—me or Yoshino—the right to a date with you, Shido.”

“Wha...?!” His eyes flew open, and he tapped his earpiece. He soon heard Reine’s sleepy voice.

“...We just wanted to make it a little more difficult.”

“Wh-why you—”

“Anyway, Shido!” Tohka cried, interrupting his conversation with Reine.

“Wh-what, Tohka?”

“What exactly makes your heart pound? Running? Running a lot?”

“...Yeah, I guess that would make my heart pound.” He smiled. It was true that that would really make his heart race.

Yoshinon began to cackle and guffaw from Yoshino's left hand. *"Ah! Ha-ha! No, no. If we're talking about making a boy's heart pound, there's only one thing."*

"Mm?" Tohka looked down at the puppet. "So what do I have to do?"

"Hmm, well, it's not exactly my style to do favors for Yoshino's enemies. But it's kinda boring to beat a kid who doesn't even know what the deal is. Hup, hup, Tohka! Come on over here a sec." Yoshinon beckoned her over. Tohka brought her face in close, and the puppet whispered something too quietly for Shido to hear.

"Wha...?!" Tohka's face was instantly tomato red.

"Well, I doubt you'll be able to take out Yoshino, but you get out there and fight, girl!" Yoshinon dragged Yoshino farther into the shop, and Tohka watched them go, frozen in place.

"H-hey, Tohka?" Shido put a hand on her shoulder. "What exactly—?"

"Aaawoo!" she cried out and shuddered.

"T-Tohka?"

"Mm... Oh, sorry. It's nothing. But...this is tough. Your heart won't pound unless I..."

"Wait. What exactly did Yoshinon tell you?!" Shido shouted.

Origami appeared soundlessly from behind them. "I understand the rules. I will get the date with Shido."

"Wha—?! Y-you're not a part of this!" Tohka glared at Origami, who ignored her and stepped into the changing room with several different swimsuits.

"Ngh! I—I can't let that girl have the right to a date!" Tohka clenched her hands into fists, grabbed swimsuits at random, and stepped into the changing room next to Origami's.

"...Umm." He clawed at his face. He felt like things were spinning out of control.

He looked over at Yoshino and saw that she was still choosing a suit. She

seemed to prefer a one-piece type, but Yoshinon was enthusiastically pushing a very revealing, sexy swimsuit.

The curtain of Tohka's changing room whooshed open.

"Shido!" Tohka revealed herself somewhat awkwardly in a one-piece suit.

"Y-yeah...?" His eyes grew round despite himself. He had known that Tohka was an incredibly beautiful girl with exquisite proportions, but he hadn't had any real chances to look her up and down from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. The swimsuit itself was a simple design, but that only emphasized Tohka's pure beauty and excited him.

"S-so, Shido?!" she demanded. "Is your heart pounding?!"

"Huh. Oh. Um... Yeah."

"O-oh yeah?! You saying that, Shido... Okay, I'm gonna win this!" She smiled.

As if his pulse were being monitored, Shido heard a familiar buzzing sound in his right ear. "...*Strike one. Calm down, Shin.*"

"Ah." He realized he'd been gaping at Tohka's body. He heard Reine sigh in exasperation.

"...*At any rate, you failed, so you'll have to take a penalty.*"

Penalty. Shido felt a cold shiver at this cursed word. "Y-you're going that far?! Wh-what kind of...?"

When Kotori was in charge, he was constantly punished with things that made his hair stand on end and cry out, "*Stop! I'll never be able to find someone who will marry me if you do that!*" So he was all the more on guard.

Reine was silent for a while, and then she asked the crew of *Fraxinus* on the other side of the earpiece, "...*What should we do?*"

He could be in real danger here. "Y-you don't have a plan?"

"...*Mm. We don't have a grasp on your weaknesses the way Kotori does, after all.*"

That made sense. If they'd had that kind of grasp on his weaknesses, Shido would have cried. He was a boy, after all.

“...Okay, how about this?” Reine suddenly said, after pondering the situation for a few seconds. *“Once you’re finished sealing Kotori’s Spirit power, you kiss her on the cheek when she’s in bed at night and say, ‘Sleep well, my sweet sister.’”*

“Wh-what?!” he cried out, stunned at the unexpected punishment.

Reine ignored his protest. *“...Then we can make a penalty where we release the video if Kotori has to be away again in the future... Now, get in there and do this. Every time you strike out, another scene is added to the list.”*

Shido place a hand to his forehead, despair weighing heavy in his heart.

The curtain next to Tohka’s dressing room snapped open.

“...!” He was briefly at a loss for words.

Origami’s slender body was clad in a triangle-top bikini. Maybe because the swimsuit was a dark color, her pale skin was striking against it, and her thighs, collarbone, and belly button—things normally hidden by clothing—were right there in front of him. She had pulled up her hair, so he got a peek at the almost irresistible nape of her neck. He was aware of his face growing red.

“Shido, what do you think?”

“...! Huh? O-oh... I think...it looks super great.”

“Oh.” She nodded, her face expressionless but still somehow happy, and stepped out of the changing room in her bare feet to do a spin in front of him.

This made his heart skip an extra beat. Once again, he heard the buzzer in his ear.

“...That good night kiss will happen when you’re lying down to sleep next to her.”

“...! Cr-crap!” His shoulders shook, but it was too late. His punishment had already been dealt.

“Ngh! Nn, nn, nn...”

Shido noticed Tohka grunting then. She was looking at Shido and Origami with narrowed eyes and gritting her teeth with maximum vexation.

“Shido! Get me that swimsuit!” she demanded.

“Huh?”

The suit she pointed at was a bikini hanging near him, a sexy design that covered about a quarter of the surface area of the suit Tohka was currently wearing.

“Th-this one? But, Tohka, I thought you were embar—”

“It’s fine! Just hand it over!”

Shido did as told and passed it to her. She snatched it away and closed the curtain. He soon heard more grunting from within the changing room.

“H-how’s this?!” The curtain flew open again, revealing a totally different Tohka.

Clad in the daring bikini Shido had just handed her, she tried to hide her belly button and thighs with her hands, her cheeks pink. Then, as if realizing this attempt to hide was pointless, she pulled her hands away for a moment, before covering herself again like she couldn’t quite relax.

“Th-that’s...” Shido swallowed hard. Although Origami had looked amazing, bikini-clad Tohka had a different kind of appeal. The dark bikini showed off her healthy proportions. And her slight embarrassment at revealing so much skin made it twice as great.

He could hardly stand it.

“...Okay, that’s a good morning kiss added to the list.”

“Ah!” Shido heard Reine’s voice in his right ear and jumped. He had apparently been intoxicated by Tohka’s bewitching figure. This strike was one he couldn’t argue against.

“Shido. D-does this look good on me...?” Tohka asked, rubbing her inner thighs nervously. Shido nodded. “I-it does?!”

“...” Origami began to seethe. Silently, she reentered the changing room.



It didn't take long before the curtain was pulled back, and Origami stood there in her street clothes. Shido had been braced for an even more revealing suit to take the fight with Tohka to the next level, and so this was a bit unexpected.

It seemed Tohka felt the same way. After a dubious look at Origami's outfit, she crossed her arms and snorted, self-satisfied. "Mm. So you accept your defeat? Good sportsmanship!"

Origami ignored Tohka and beckoned Shido silently with one hand.

"Huh? Wh-what?" He looked at her questioningly and walked over to her.

She grabbed his hand and wrapped his fingers around the hem of her skirt.

"Whoa?!" Shido cried out, bewildered.

"H-hey! What are you doing?!" Tohka shouted.

With the ultimate coolness, Origami parted her lips. "Flip it up."

""Wha—?!"" Shido and Tohka were in marvelous harmony. He heard a buzzer in his right ear, but he didn't even have the brainpower to register it in any real way. He sent his eyes looking anywhere but at Origami.

"Wh-what are you doing, Origami?!"

"Yeah, you! That's against the rules!"

"It's entirely in accordance with the rules. Flip it up, Shido."

"Ah! Th-that's just sort of...," he stammered, his fingers shaking.

Origami tightened her grip on his hand, and the hem of her skirt slowly inched up.

"H-hey!" He tried to resist, but it was useless. Slowly but surely, the forbidden area revealed itself. Sadly, Shido was still a boy. Even as he tried to look anywhere but, he ended up staring at what lay beneath this skirt.

Origami was wearing a white swimsuit under her clothes.

"Wha...?! What the—?!" Tohka roared, stunned.

"I told you." Origami turned her gaze on Tohka, seeming smug somehow. "It's

not in violation of the rules.”

This was a victory of the imagination. Instead of increasing the amount of skin shown, she had decreased it, making the destructive power of the swimsuit all the greater. A victory of tantalizing glimpse. *She really is the genius of Raizen High School*, Shido thought absently, his brain about to boil over.

“I’m the one who made his heart pound the hardest,” Origami declared. “I will take the date.”

“Th-that’s just...” Tohka hurriedly raced over to Shido and put her ear to his chest. After listening to his heart beat for a few seconds, a look of astonishment came across her face. “H-his heart *is* pounding...”

Origami calmly flapped her skirt. “You should acknowledge your defeat.”

“Ngh! Nnnnnngh...” Tohka clenched her jaw, brushed off Origami, and took Shido’s hand.

“T-Tohka...?” His eyebrows crawled up his forehead.

Her face flushing red, Tohka clutched his hand in both of hers. “Okay!” she cried, as if she had made up her mind about something.

“Yoshinon... I’m trusting you here!” she exclaimed as she yanked his hand out in front of her.

“Wha—?!” He put on the brakes at the last minute and interrupted this forward motion.

Because the intended destination was Tohka’s soft, bikini-clad breasts.

“He—wha—?! What are you doing, Tohka?!” he yelped. “Stop it!”

“N-no, no, no, no! Make your heart pound for me, Shido!”

“It is! It’s pounding! It’s pounding plenty, okay?!”

“R-really...?” A concerned look on her face, she put her ear to his chest once more.

A few seconds later...

“It was pounding harder for Origami Tobiichi...!” Tohka cried in despair and tried to press his hand to her breasts once again, while her blush deepening.

“H-hold on! Calm down, Tohka!” he shouted. “You’re embarrassed, too, aren’t you?! Don’t force yourself!”

“I-I’m okay...! With you, I’m okay! I mean, you touched them before!”

“What?” Origami was suddenly interested. “Tell me all the details.”

“Don’t get hung up on that. Stop her!” Shido shouted.

“Shi...do...!”

He heard a voice like a mosquito buzzing from somewhere. “Huh?”

Tohka and Origami had apparently also heard it. They froze and raised doubtful eyebrows.

“Mm. That voice belongs to...”

“...”

“That’s...Yoshino, right?” Shido perked his ears up and heard the small voice again.

“Shi...do. P-please...help me...!”

It seemed to be coming from inside the third changing room.

Help me. The instant those words hit his ears, he lost his head, raced over to the changing room, and put a hand on the curtain.

“...! Yoshino, I’m gonna open it! Okay?!” He yanked the curtain open. And in front of him was...

“Sh-Shido...” Yoshino had her clothes half off so that she was half-naked with her arms through the openings of a bikini top that she pressed to her chest with tears in her eyes.

What was this? Her slender body was so alluring that it threatened to cause an abnormal, immoral, forbidden sexual desire to blossom in Shido’s heart.

“I—I can’t...get it...on with...a single...hand...,” she explained weakly.

In his ear, the loudest buzzer of the day sounded.

This was the moment when the winner of the day-long date with Shido was decided.



“Aah... I’m completely wiped out today.” Shido let out a long sigh as he sat down on the bench in the break area on *Fraxinus*. He brought a paper cup to his lips and downed the café au lait inside.

Although it was called the break room, there wasn’t much going on. It was a simple space with a couple (free) vending machines up against the wall where the hallway dented inward a bit, with two benches opposite them and two tall decorative plants.

There was a proper cafeteria space elsewhere, but Shido preferred this place where there were fewer people coming and going. Especially on days like today when he was tired.



“Training’s fine, but I don’t think I should be using up all my strength before the big day...”

In the end, Shido had bought each of the girls a swimsuit and gotten a bite to eat before returning home. Then Reine had called him up, and they had gone over the plan again. They’d squeezed in a supper with Tohka and Yoshino before returning to the meeting, which had taken a fair bit of time.

He really wanted to talk with Kotori once more, but given that she was unstable, he wasn’t allowed to see her. So with nothing left to do before the big date, Shido was set adrift, and he ended up here, staring at the wall.

“...” He exhaled faintly, looking up at the ceiling.

It had been fine until earlier. As soon as he had a little free time, however, extraneous thoughts that he’d blocked began to pop up. Specifically, thoughts about what Origami had told him the previous day.

“Five years ago. A Spirit caused a large fire in the Nanko residential area in Tengu and burned my mother and father before my eyes. It was that Spirit who controls flames.”

“Was it really...Kotori?”

Kotori. His own little sister had killed Origami’s parents. There was no way he could believe that. He didn’t want to believe it, but he also very much doubted that Origami would make a joke about something of that nature.

“Honestly... What is the truth?”

When he searched his memories from that time, he felt a throbbing pain deep inside his head, far from the reach of any hand.

“Ngh...”

He still couldn’t remember everything about that day. What exactly had happened five years ago? How had he—or Kotori—known the way to seal a Spirit’s power? He couldn’t remember a single thing. He felt like a skillful filter had been planted in his memory, which was an extremely disturbing thought.

“May I sit next to you?” came a man’s voice abruptly from above.

He jumped and looked up to find Kannazuki standing there holding a paper cup.

“Oh. Yes, go ahead,” he said, and the man smiled and sat down.

“How are you feeling about tomorrow, Shido?”

“Um... Ha-ha... To be honest, I’m so anxious, I can hardly sit with my thoughts. I can’t picture me making Kotori weak in the knees. I can’t believe I sealed her power five years—” He cut himself off. It was more than a matter of belief or disbelief—he had no recollection of it.

“...? Is something the matter?” Kannazuki asked.

“Oh. Uh...actually.” Shido briefly explained that he couldn’t fully remember what had happened all those years ago.

“Hmm. You have no memory of it?”

“No. Just of that incident, nothing at all.”

“Well, I suppose not.”

“Huh?” Shido looked at the vice commander in surprise.

He brought the paper cup in his hand to his lips before replying. “When you were first told that she was a Spirit, you seemed very surprised. If you had remembered the goings-on of five years earlier, you would have evinced a different reaction.” He set the paper cup down on the bench and put a hand to his chin. “Hmm. Would you like to watch the video?”

“Video...?” Shido frowned.

“Yes.” Kannazuki gave an exaggerated nod. “A video of the catastrophe in Nanko, Tengu. It’s mere seconds long, but it shows what appears to be the Spirit commander and you, Shido.”

“...!” He gasped and opened his eyes wide. He was glad he’d finished his café au lait already. If he’d had a paper cup full of liquid in his hand at that moment, he would have spilled half of it all over the floor. “There’s a video?!”

“Yes. I believe some TV helicopter filmed it, but Ratatoskr suppressed the master tape before it could be made public. Shall I get it ready for you?”

“P-please...!” Shido said immediately. There was no way he could say no to that.



“Origami?! You should’ve called me if you were already out of the hospital!” AST Captain Ryouko Kusakabe yelled when Origami popped in at the Tengu Garrison CR unit hangar before heading home after saying good-bye to Shido and the others.

Ryouko looked to be doing some kind of equipment check in work pants and a black tank top; she had a clipboard tucked under her arm and a pen in her other hand. Because the CR units were delicate and extremely top secret, few people were permitted access to them. The AST captain often had to take care of administrative tasks, despite her being combat personnel.

Origami lowered her eyes and shook her head. “I was pulled into a very important matter.”

“An important matter? And what is that?” Ryouko raised an eyebrow and pointed at the paper bag in Origami’s right hand.

“This is a priceless gift,” she whispered, bringing the bag up to chest level. “And an ominous item carved with the bitterness of defeat.”

“Huh? Wh-what?” Ryouko frowned doubtfully and stared at the paper bag, which contained the swimsuit Shido had bought Origami.

“I will have my revenge on Hermit.”

“Wait. Why is Hermit part of this story?” Ryouko asked, starting to perspire, just as a simple transport vehicle slowly approached, pulling a massive piece of equipment.

“Whoops. Origami, you get back, too.” Ryouko beckoned her with one hand, and Origami walked over to her.

Then the girl glanced at the equipment passing behind them. It was an enormous unit, five or more meters in length, covered in a protective sheet.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Mm.” Ryouko ran her pen across the clipboard she’d had under her arm as

she replied. “Newly deployed test model. DW-029, destructive weapon White Licorice. Two large Cleave Leaf laser blades, two Blastalk magic guns, fifty point five centimeters, and eight exchangeable, large-capacity Loot Box weapon containers. A wild unit that has one person carrying all the firepower of an entire AST.”

“...” Origami looked up at the large weapon silently. “Is it possible to defeat Efreet using this?”

“Hmm? What are you on about?” Ryouko glanced over at her. “*You* can’t use this. No authorization, no training. It’s a test model from DEM. Theoretically, at least, it’s supposedly capable of taking down a Spirit... But it disabled a DEM wizard after thirty minutes of fully equipped operation. Take it from me. You leave this one alone.”

“...Then why send it here?” Origami asked.

“Mm. Seems someone in the brass at DEM passed it this way thinking that Mana might be able to handle it. But, well, if the girl in question’s asleep, it’s just a fancy lump sitting here.”

“Oh.”

“And...Efreet? That fire Spirit from five years ago? Why’d you bring her up? She was only ever confirmed the one time and never—” Ryouko stopped abruptly and turned curious eyes on Origami before snapping her fingers. “Oh, *that* was Efreet?”

“...! What do you mean?” Origami frowned the slightest bit and leaned toward Ryouko with her whole body. She took a step forward and then another to close the distance between them.

Perhaps surprised at this strange behavior, Ryouko moved the opposite foot back and leaned slightly away from her. “Wh-what? That was out of the blue.”

“Just tell me.”

“Tell you?” Ryouko looked at her dubiously. “The day before yesterday, when you and Mana were fighting Nightmare on the high school roof, was that Efreet that showed? It was a Spirit of flames, right?”

“...!” Origami gasped and brought her face in close. “How do you know a Spirit of flames appeared the day before yesterday?”

“How? Because I watched the video, of course.”

“...!” Origami’s eyes flew open. She never dreamed that a clue about Efreet could lie so close at hand. “Captain Kusakabe.”

“Wh-what?”

“Please show me that video. Right now.”



“Er, let’s see...”

Shido and Kannazuki had moved from the break room to the briefing room where the strategy meeting had been held on the previous day. The vice commander had no sooner sat down in the same chair as yesterday than he was tapping at the console before him in the round table.

“I’m sorry this is taking so long. If this were the terminal in my office, it would go a little more smoothly.”

“That’s not a problem at all,” Shido said. “Is the video stored in here?”

“No. The video itself is not stored on *Fraxinus*. I’m accessing the database at headquarters.”

Shido raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar *headquarters*, but it only made sense when he thought about it. *Fraxinus* was an airship. No matter how well the Realizers worked, it couldn’t exactly stay floating in the sky forever.

“You basically need a network environment then, right?” he asked. “So wouldn’t your office work just as well?”

“Well, that is true, yes,” Kannazuki agreed. “But the screen of my terminal there isn’t very large. It’s not well suited to viewing detailed images. Ah, here we are. Look at the monitor.”

A video appeared on the monitor in the center of the round table. It showed a corner of town filmed from above. The carpet of bright red flames that filled the screen were better described as a gas field or a volcano or a furnace. The infernal purgatory was such that it was hard to believe that only a few hours

earlier, people had been living and working there, going about their daily business.

From the speakers, he could hear the whirring of helicopter blades and the choppy voice of what sounded like a male reporter, punctuated with occasional explosions, which shook the screen slightly.

“...Ngh.” Shido frowned. The scene was even more intense than he’d imagined. He only remembered that the place where he used to live had caught fire. He never dreamed it was a disaster of this magnitude.

“Ah, it’s coming up now,” Kannazuki said in a quiet voice, his eyes on the screen as well.

The helicopter spun around and gradually dropped altitude. At the same time, the camera zoomed in, and the image blurred. After a moment, the focus was adjusted bit by bit.

“That’s—!” Shido cried out when he saw what was on the edge of the screen.

In the center of the area, the houses that should have been there had been completely burned down, unlike the outskirts. In that wasteland, he found a familiar figure.

The video was old, the resolution was poor, and the image was unstable since it had been filmed from the air. Plus, there were any other number of quality issues making the video extremely rough. There was no way Shido would make a mistake about this, however.

“Kotori...”

She was wearing the same Astral Dress he’d seen on the roof of Raizen High School the other day. And at her feet was a small shadow.

He furrowed his brow and focused on the shaky screen. “Is that...me?”

And then...

“Huh?” All the air was knocked out of his lungs.

It was in front of Kotori and Shido. A thing. *Something* was there before them.

The average person probably would’ve assumed it was simply static running

across the screen. But it wasn't. This was... This shadow was...

"...!" Shido dropped to his knees, clutching his head in his hands.

The moment he saw *it*, the throbbing lying dormant in his head suddenly flared up, and the pain was blinding.

"Shido? What's the matter?" Kannazuki asked.

But Shido couldn't answer him. He stared at the screen, gazing at the static lurking in front of a young Kotori and Shido. "Who...on earth...? What are you...?"

"Who? What are you speaking of?" Kannazuki cocked his head to one side.

"This one. In front of Kotori and me..." Shido suddenly understood that this shadow was a person. At the very least, he knew it was a being to which the pronoun *who* could be applied.

"Ah..."

The pain in his head grew blindingly bright, and Shido passed out.



"...!"

Having dragged Ryouko away from work to the briefing room, Origami looked at the video projected onto the screen, stunned.

The quality of the video itself was extremely poor. The resolution was low, and the camera was too far away. And because the filming only started once events were well underway, it was only a few minutes long, likely because the camera got destroyed.

But it was more than enough for Origami.

The figure she'd seen with blurred eyes five years ago. The silhouette she'd caught sight of with a confused mind two days ago. She could see the face of this hated enemy clearly now for the first time.

She replayed the video from the start and paused it. She zoomed in on Efreet's face. Origami's suspicion changed to conviction.

The Spirit of flames she'd been chasing these last five years. This was her face.

“Kotori...Itsuka.”

It was Shido Itsuka’s little sister.

Chapter 9

Final Rendezvous

June 11, 9:55 AM.

Shido was standing in front of Pachiko at the east exit of Tengu Station, with a bag stuffed with the swimsuit and beach towel he had bought the day before over his shoulder.

The statue was of a sitting dog. It was fairly well-known as a meeting spot at Tengu Station, but because of a certain loyal dog that was even more famous, it was rarely called by its actual name. The fact was, Shido didn't even really remember what it was.

"...Ah." He groaned quietly, pressing a hand to his forehead. After he'd passed out the day before, he'd fallen asleep and woken up in the *Fraxinus* medical office.

Apparently, they'd checked over his vitals just in case and given him an IV, but he could still feel the slight throbbing in his head.

"Are you all right, Shido?"

He heard Kannazuki's voice over his earpiece. Naturally, since Kotori couldn't exactly guide him on his date that day, this man was stepping in on her behalf.

"Yeah...for the most part," Shido remarked and slapped his cheeks.

He was concerned about what had happened yesterday, but he couldn't be thinking about that now. Whatever else was going on, he had to go on a date with Kotori and get her to fall for him today. This was an extremely difficult mission, but if he didn't complete it, Kotori's mind would be swallowed up by the Spirit power. There wasn't room for even a single misstep.

"You have the plan in your head, yes? We'll support you from here. It's all right, you are an extraordinary savior-slash-playboy who has made several

Spirits weak in the knees. Please have faith in yourself."

"...Right." He smiled slightly at Kannazuki's encouraging (?) words. That description of himself was honestly not his favorite.

"...Kotori's been sent down to the ground." Now Reine's inflectionless voice came to him through the earpiece. *"She should be there soon. We're counting on you, Shin."*

"...! O-okay." He took a deep breath to calm himself.

Before long, a small figure walked toward him. Wearing a cute, frilly, short-sleeved blouse and dark brown overall shorts, she held a bag in her hand, which he assumed contained a swimsuit. Familiar black ribbons tied her long hair up in two bunches.

Even though it had only been two days since he saw her face, he felt strangely moved for some reason. Maybe he was relieved that she was still the Kotori that he knew.

"H-hey, Kotori." He raised a hand in greeting.

"Mm. Sorry to make you wait," Kotori replied.

And then there was a moment of silence.

Chatting with his little sister was pretty much a daily thing for him, and yet he felt a little nervous. He couldn't think of a thing to say.

"...Shin, why aren't you saying something? First—," Reine instructed, while Kotori let out an exasperated sigh.

"You've got nothing to say when a girl meets you all dressed up? I thought I taught you this—the basic of all basics?"

"...! O-oh."

She was exactly right. She had told him this when Tohka appeared, so why had he forgotten now?

He was about to speak as instructed when he suddenly realized something. "You got...all dressed up," he commented.

"...!" Kotori twitched. "Hmph. Well, you know. The format for this day is

technically a date, after all. I have to give you some chances to take action, Shido... And I wouldn't hate getting complimented by you."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Anyway, isn't it about time to catch the train?" Kotori turned toward the station and then whirled around to face Shido again, a bold smile crossing her face. "Now. How about we start our 'war'—a date?"

"Y-yeah." Shido gulped loudly. He knew what that phrase meant.

"Mm!"

"O-okay...!"

"Ooh, this'll be fun."

Three extra voices chimed in after Shido, and he frowned.

Suspicious, he looked back and froze in place. Standing there were Tohka and Yoshino, all dressed up for an outing.

"Tohka, Yoshino... And Yoshinon?! Wh-what are you doing here?!"

"Mm?" Tohka eyed him curiously. "What are you talking about? Aren't we going to Ocean Park or whatever?"

"H-how do you know that?!"

"What do you mean, how?" Tohka frowned as if to say that Shido's reaction was entirely unexpected.

"It's..." Yoshino spoke up in a faltering voice as if to fill in the blanks for him. "Reine told us...to come. But...is that a problem...?"

"...?!" He gasped. And then, before he could ask, he heard a voice over the earpiece.

"...Oh, right, right. I guess I didn't tell you. They're coming on your date today, too."

"Wh-why would...?" Shido asked, starting to perspire. True, there was such a thing as a group date, but as a general rule, dates usually involved just two people.

“...Well, I thought that might be best for today.”

“Uh. Uh-huh...”

This was Reine. He knew she would have thought this through and that she wouldn't do anything to mess this all up, but he still couldn't help worrying. He lowered his voice and asked, “But is this okay? What about Kotori's mood and stuff...?”

“...Mm. You don't need to worry about that.”

“R-really...?” He looked back at his sister.

The expression on her face was unchanged even at the sudden appearance of Tohka and Yoshino.

“...” Shido's cheeks twitched. He was about to let out a sigh of relief, but he was quickly made to understand that he was very much mistaken.

“...Huh. Very bold of you, *Shido*. This should be fun,” Kotori said with a *grin*. Not much else about her expression had changed, but the aura rising up behind her was obviously different. It was so intense that if this were a manga, there would have been flames roaring behind her.

“Uh. I—I mean...” Shido's voice cracked, and he put a finger to his earpiece, raising a small voice in protest. “This is bad, though! Very bad! She's emanating a very dangerous vibe!”

“...You think? I don't think it's all that bad...”

“Wh-what is Kotori's mood meter and likability like right now...?! ”

When he went on a date with a Spirit, Reine always used a special Realizer to monitor the mental state of the subject.

“...”

She was silent for a while.

“...Mm. Well. That's... Right... Good luck,” she said, sounding more irresponsible than ever before... The numbers had to have been pretty bad.

“H-hey, Reine...!” Shido shouted, despair in his heart.

Kotori walked briskly over to Tohka and Yoshino and gently patted their

shoulders. “Wohkay. How about we get going then? Did you make sure to bring your swimsuits?”

Faces that had clouded over at Shido’s reaction cleared up right away.

“Yeah! Of course!”

“Shido bought us...swimsuits yesterday...”

“Wow, that’s great then. Someone’s a nice guy, huh, Shido?” Kotori said, turning her eyes toward him. Her tone and expression were both gentle, but for some reason, they were ghastly in a way that made his stomach turn inside out.

“Eep...!” He shuddered.

“Okay, let’s go. Let’s head out!” Kotori led Tohka and Yoshino toward the ticket gates.

“Shido, please go after them!” Kannazuki said. *“We can still recover from this. We’ll provide backup once you reach your destination!”*

“R-roger...” He managed to move his frozen feet somehow.

...This date was already shaping up to be a rough one.

Ocean Park was a theme park close to Eibu Station, five stops away from Tengu Station. It had a water area with all kinds of pools, a large bathing area, and indoor attractions, as well as an amusement area, which mainly consisted of an outdoor amusement park. During summer vacation, the park was a popular destination for families and couples from all around town.

However, it was still only the middle of June. Although the indoor facilities and outdoor amusement park were open year-round, the main attraction, the outdoor pool, didn’t open until next month, so there were far fewer visitors than at peak times. Given that the mood would have been shot with the large crowds he sometimes saw bumping and jostling on the summer news, this might have actually been the perfect time for a date.

Shido finished changing, left the locker room, and stepped out into the indoor pool area.

He couldn’t see the girls yet, so he figured they were still changing. He leaned back and stretched as he looked around. “Whoa... This is pretty impressive.”

The space was covered by a domed roof, and a large pool patterned after a sandy beach spread out underneath it, a waterslide in the form of a rocky mountain on the other side of this fake ocean. The design seemed expressly intended to tickle a boy's adventurous spirit.

"It's fine to have fun, but please don't forget about the commander, all right?" Kannazuki chided him.

"I—I know... And like, can I wear this earpiece under water?"

"...Yes. It's completely waterproof. Just be careful that it doesn't pop out of your ear," Reine warned.

"Shido! Sorry to make you wait!" a cheerful voice called out from behind him.

He looked back to find Tohka, Yoshino, and Kotori standing there. Tohka's and Yoshino's outfits were the swimsuits they'd bought the previous day, just as he'd expected.

Tohka's was a light purple bikini, while Yoshino's was a pale pink one-piece with a frilly bit like a skirt around the waist. Yoshino still wasn't great at changing, but he assumed Tohka or Kotori had helped her into her suit. Neither of them seemed embarrassed the way they had been at the shop, perhaps because that trip had gotten them used to the concept of this attire. Or perhaps because everyone there was dressed the same way they were.

"H-hey," Shido replied, waving, and let out a sigh of relief.

Tohka and Yoshino were both beautiful in an entirely otherworldly way, like sirens of the deep. In fact, if he had just happened upon them, without actually knowing them, he might have indeed ignored Kotori to stare at them.

"...It's a good thing we did that training," Reine observed, as if reading Shido's mind.

"...Were you planning to have Tohka and Yoshino come along even then? And that's why you went and made me go buy them swimsuits..."

"...Hmm, who can say?" Reine replied, and Shido sighed.

"Yaaaah!" Tohka shouted. "This is amazing! There's a lake and a mountain inside a building!"

Yoshino was also breathing heavily with delight, which was unusual for her, and she opened her mouth, her cheeks flushing. “Th-there’s so much water...!”

“Ah! This really ratchets up the excitement!” Yoshino also flapped its hands.

“Shido, can we go in the lake?!”

“Yeah, of course. I mean, that’s basically the point of being here,” he replied.

Tohka’s eyes shone even brighter. “All right! Here we go, Yoshino!”

“Y-yeah...!”

They raced toward the pool.

“Those two seem pretty excited, huh?”

He heard a voice from behind him and jumped.

“H-hey, Kotori,” he said, slowly looking back.

Just as he’d expected, Kotori was there in a swimsuit, arms crossed, a Chupa Chups in her mouth. Her suit was a white two-piece. The top was a halter-neck tube top and was strangely sexy.

“...” Now that he was thinking about it, he felt like he hadn’t seen Kotori in a swimsuit in years.

Because their parents were never really home, Itsuka family leisure time was seriously limited. Of course, they had classes in the pool in summer, so he had washed and folded Kotori’s school swimsuit, but he’d never actually seen her wearing a normal one.

Kotori raised doubtful eyebrows. “What are you staring at? You’re a failure of a person if you’re getting the hots for your sister, even if it’s not biologically incest, you know?”

“...! A-as if I would!” Shido gasped.

“Oh yeah?” Kotori shrugged with extreme chill.

“...What are you doing, Shin?” He heard Reine’s voice in his right ear.

“Huh?”

“...I told you before, didn’t I? She’s all dressed up. You’re not going to say

anything?”

“Oh.”

Reine was right. Shido cleared his throat before turning back toward his sister.

“K-Kotori.”

“What?” she responded, her eyes narrowed.

For a moment, Shido was lost for words. He never dreamed it could be this embarrassing to pay his sister a compliment. Maybe it was just that he was too close to her.

“...You’ve got it.” Reine gave him a push, and Shido averted his eyes slightly as he parted trembling lips.

“Uh. Um... That, uh, it looks good on you. That swimsuit. I—I think it’s...cute.” He was practically Yoshino level of shy, but he somehow managed to get the whole sentence out.

“...!” Kotori’s eyes snapped open, and her cheeks reddened ever so slightly. But she quickly shook her head and flicked the stick of her Chupa Chups up, a bold smile crossing her face. “Oh, why, thank you. I suppose Reine or Kannazuki instructed you to compliment me?”

“Ngh...!” He groaned. She had seen right through him. Saying nothing, however, was basically the same as admitting she was right. Shido followed up with as short of a pause as possible. “N-no, they didn’t. It’s what I really think.”

He did think Kotori looked cute in her swimsuit. Although he was a little hesitant about putting that thought into words, he wasn’t lying to her.

“Wow, I’m honored.” Kotori snorted, and her lips spread out into a malicious grin. “So what did you think was cute in specific?”

“Wha...?! Uh. Um.”

“...Mm. Guess this is where we come in,” Reine said in his right ear.

On the bridge of the airship *Fraxinus* floating in the sky directly above Ocean Park, a little ways from its usual airspace, Vice Commander Kyouhei Kannazuki called out from where he stood next to the captain’s chair. “Now, everyone, it’s

time to show what we're made of!"

Kannazuki was temporarily in command of the ship. Normally, the leader of the ship would sit down in the captain's chair, but he did not do that.

This chair belonged to Kotori. He had faith in her return. He couldn't possibly sully this seat by sitting in it... And he preferred to be sat on by the captain rather than sit in the captain's chair anyway.

A window with three options was displayed on the monitor that showed the scene at the pool.

1. "ALL OF IT! YOU'RE CUTE WHATEVER YOU WEAR, KOTORI."

2. "THE SWIMSUIT LOOKS SIMPLE, BUT THE DESIGN IS ACTUALLY ELEGANT. YOU'VE GOT EXCELLENT TASTE."

3. "OH, I LOVE HOW YOUR CHEST IS JUST STARTING TO FILL IT OUT."

"Crew, please make your choices!" Kannazuki shouted, and the aggregate results were immediately displayed on his terminal.

The majority was with (1). Next was (2). There wasn't a single vote for (3).

"Hmm. You chose one, then? Well, that's reasonable, I guess." He put a hand to his chin and pondered this.

A crew member's voice came up from the lower deck. "Er, it might be a bit overused, but no one would be unhappy to hear that."

"Two isn't bad, either, but I'm concerned that it would be the swimsuit that has caught his eye," said another.

"Three... Well, that's out of the question."

"I suppose so." Kannazuki nodded and brought his mouth close to the mic. "Shido, three. 'I love how your chest is just starting to fill it out.'"

A heartbeat later.

""Whaaat?!""

The voices of the *Fraxinus* crew and Shido at the pool blended together in perfect harmony.

“V-Vice Commander, have you lost your mind?! This is Commander Kotori we’re talking about!”

“Didn’t I just say that three was out of the question?!”

Critical voices—shrieks, really—flew up at him from the lower deck. But Kannazuki slowly spread his hands to quell this uproar.

“It’s precisely *because* this is Commander Kotori.”

“Huh...?”

His calm tone quieted the crew temporarily. Kannazuki smiled gently and turned a hand toward the Kotori in a swimsuit on the big screen.

“After all, take a look for yourself. That slender figure, her beautiful, unformed body. The fleeting glimmer of a thirteen-year-old, an eighth grader. Impossible to resist. There can be no other choice.”

“That’s your personal preference, Vice Commander! If he says that, the commander will kick him!”

Kannazuki gasped. “He will even receive a reward! It’s perfect, isn’t it?!”

“I’m telling you, this just...!”

The crew scratched their heads, at a total loss for words at this point.

All the while, time was passing. Shido’s panicked voice came through over the speakers. “*Sh-should I really say that...?*”

“Yes, of course. You may also substitute ‘boobs’ for ‘chest,’ if you wish.”

“*...I’ll go with the original.*”

The crew hit the mic switch desperately to try and stop Shido, but the captain’s chair had the highest priority for that circuit.

Shido turned back to Kotori, determined.

“Uh. Umm. Okay.”

Cheeks spasming, Shido looked at Kotori’s chest. It was a clearly unhinged choice, but it was also the choice of the crew based on the output of *Fraxinus*’s AI. He had to trust them.

“Um. I love how your chest is just starting to fill it out.”

“Wha—?!” Kotori’s cheeks turned red, and she slapped her hands over her chest to hide it. “Wh-what are you talking about...?! *That’s* what you’re thinking?!”

“Uh. I—I mean, it’s...!” Shido waved his hands in a panic, and a shrill siren rang in his right ear. An ominous sound he’d heard before. It was the emergency alarm to inform him that a Spirit’s mood or likability had dropped dramatically or that her mental state had become unstable.

“C-calm down, Kotori! That was just a...!”

“...*Shin. This is an emergency.*” Reine’s voice drowned out his own excuses.

“I know! How can I get her to calm—?”

“...*No, not her.*”

“Huh...?”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!” An earsplitting shriek echoed throughout the pool area.

“Wh-what was that?!”

“Shido! There!” Kotori pointed toward the open sea of the pool.

Half of which was now a skating rink with Yoshino on top of it, wailing.

“...So Yoshino got swept away in the wave pool, and you panicked.”

It had been about thirty minutes since the *mysterious* ice appeared in the pool. Shido sighed as he used Kotori’s portable hair dryer to blow-dry Yoshino on Yoshino’s left hand.

Fortunately, there hadn’t been a huge commotion, and the pool was already back to normal, but Yoshino’s shoulders were still slumped dejectedly. And Tohka remained curled into herself.

“I. I’m...sorry...”

“Mm. I’m ashamed. It was while I was there with her...”

“Well, like I said, don’t worry about it too much. It didn’t turn into something bigger or anything,” Shido told them.

“That’s right,” assured Kotori from where she stood next to him. “It’s Shido’s fault for neglecting to envision all the possibilities. You’ve got nothing to be sorry about.”

“...Hey.” Shido tousled Yoshinon’s head as he hit it with hot air. “Okay! I think you’re about dry. You okay, Yoshinon?”

Yoshinon shook its entire body like a dog before placing a hand to its chest and panting, *“A-ah... I went on a grand adventure. I thought I was a goner.”*

“I’m sorry...Yoshinon.”

“Nah, it’s fine. No worries. I got to see you again, safe and sound. Everything’s A-okay, Yoshino.”

“Mm-hmm...” Yoshino nodded as she patted Yoshinon’s head.

Kotori shrugged. “Well, it’s no surprise you don’t know how this place works. I’m pretty sure there was a pool float rental counter over there. How about we go borrow a couple?”

“Pool float?” Tohka cocked her head to one side.

“Oh.” Kotori twirled her index finger around. “You know what they say: Seeing is believing. It’d be faster to just show you. Let’s go.”

Kotori started walking, and Tohka and Yoshino stood up to follow her.

“Hey! Wait up!” Shido folded up the hair dryer and chased after the three girls.

When he caught up, Kotori slid in close to him. Almost as if she wanted to make sure Tohka and Yoshino couldn’t overhear their conversation.

“Wh-what? What’s going on?”

“...Mm. About before.”

“Before?”

“...The whole what-part-is-cute thing.”

“...!” Shido felt a hand reach into his chest and squeeze his heart. He thought he’d managed to dodge that bullet with the whole Yoshino incident, but of course, he was not that lucky. This was, after all, commander mode “evil”

Kotori. The embodiment of super sadism, digging deep for the tears if her target showed any weakness. “O-oh. That. Right...”

“That... C’mon, that was actually an instruction from *Fraxinus*, right? Or...was that, um, really how you feel?”

“Uh! N-no, that was—”

“...*How you really feel, yes?*” Reine’s voice asked in his right ear, almost like the whisper of a demon lurking inside of Shido. If he reacted to her question with Kotori right beside him, Kotori would definitely catch on. He managed somehow to keep himself from saying what was on his mind.

“...*Kotori might have guessed what’s happening, but if you say ‘Ratatoskr told me to’ on a date, you’re definitely going to kill the mood. Even if she knows all this in her mind, you admitting it will seriously change things. Reason and emotion can’t coexist.*”

Shido gritted his teeth before turning his eyes back to Kotori. “Um... That was how I...really feel.”

“...” Kotori was silent for a moment.

Aah. He had admitted it. He had no other choice, though. Still, he had just told her flat out how he really felt. Shido turned his head to the heavens in despair.

She was definitely going to snort at him. She was going to think he was the very personification of sexual desire, a boy who seriously felt animal lust for his little sister. On top of that, she was going to think he had a Lolita complex and was in love with developing bodies. He was absolutely going to get an earful. She was going to look down on him like she was looking at garbage, make him grovel, kick him, and jeer that he must love this kind of thing, that he was a perverted, piece-of-shit pedophile, ohhh, but maybe that wouldn’t be so different from how things already were.

But even after a few seconds, neither sharp punches nor abusive words came flying toward him. He glanced over at her, curiously, to find that Kotori’s head was hanging and that she was blushing.

“...Huh... It was, huh?” She touched a hand to the modest breasts covered by her swimsuit.

“Kotori?”

“...!”

Kotori jumped and launched a backhand blow into his solar plexus.

“Quo...?! ”

“...Hmph! ‘Quo,’ he says. I’m no sorcerous stabber here.” She turned her face away and walked briskly ahead, pulling Tohka and Yoshino along behind her.



“Mm? What’s wrong with Shido?”

“He looks...like he’s...in pain...”

“Hmph. Don’t bother about him. Probably just a flare-up of his chronic condition, Solar Plexus Throbbing Syndrome. You can’t go near him. You’ll catch it.” She placed hands on the shoulders of a worried Tohka and Yoshino and urged them forward.

“Th-that jerk...” He stood up, pressing a hand to his stomach and ignoring the pain as he moved to go after them.

A message from *Fraxinus* reached his ear.

“...Shin, stop. A number of Ratatoskr personnel are mixed in the crowd there. How about we try a little something?”

“A little something? Like what?”

“...Maybe we could go with the gold standard: The hero shows up just in the nick of time when the girl is surrounded by a group of pickup artists.”

“Are you sure about that? I feel like she’ll send them packing before I get the chance to show up,” Shido said, anxious.

This time, Kannazuki’s voice came to him, full of confidence. *“It’s all right. No matter how tough a girl acts, she’s waiting somewhere in her heart for a knight in shining armor to arrive. I know this only too well.”*

“But aren’t you a man, Kannazuki?”

“I occasionally dress as a woman.”

“...” Shido felt like he had just been treated to a strange reveal, but he decided to pretend he hadn’t heard it and turned back toward the girls.

They were already standing in front of the counter lined with pool floats and beach boards, talking to the staff member there.

“...Now, we’re sending in our people in disguise. You chase them off and make yourself look good, Shin.”

“Oh. Uh.”

Reine had no sooner finished speaking than three men approached Kotori, Tohka, and Yoshino. Bleached hair and tanned skin. From the look of them, they were used to playing around.

They called out to the girls, grinning and waving.

“Hello! Hey, girls, where you from?”

“Is it just the three of you? Awfully lonely, huh?”

“How about hanging out with us for a bit?”

They offered up time-tested pickup lines that could have been plucked from ancient texts.

“Mm. What’s with you guys?”

“...! Uh. Mm...”

Tohka frowned suspiciously, and Yoshino hid behind Tohka.

Well, he supposed that kind of reaction was normal when a stranger suddenly started talking to you. The abnormal reaction was the cold glare Kotori was giving the men.

“...Okay, Shin. You’re up.”

“Uh. Uh-huh...”

One of the men grabbed Kotori’s wrist, smirking. “Come on! Just for a little while. We’ll have a lot of fun, I promise.”

Another one of the men turned a hand in Shido’s direction and made a gesture beckoning him. Shido supposed that meant he should go and stop them now.

“Okay, fine. I guess I’ll go.” He rubbed his solar plexus one last time before stepping forward. “Hey! Sorry, but these girls are—”

“Third Mate Fumio Awashima,” Kotori growled, staring at the face of the man clasping her wrist.

“What?!” The man jumped.

Kotori didn’t stop to pat herself on the back. Instead, she let her eyes roam

over the faces of the other men in turn.

“Third Mate Yoshiharu Teshirogi. Third Mate Takashi Kawanishi. Mm. Your disguises aren’t bad. I’d give you passing marks. But the dialogue is just... Who wrote the script?” Kotori asked, rolling her eyes.

The men took a step back, looking confused.

“H-how did you recognize nobodies like us—?”

“Nobodies? What? As long as you’re a member of Ratatoskr and on my team, you’re family. Is there a parent alive who would forget the face of their child?”

“...!!”

The men dropped to their knees and began to weep hot tears.

“C-Commander...!”

“It’s sweltering out. Take your leave.”

“Yes!”

Kotori waved them off, and the men bowed neatly, the polar opposite of the characters they’d been playing, and returned from whence they had come.

Tohka and Yoshino look at each other quizzically.

“Mm. What was that all about?”

“Kotori... You’re...amazing.”

Kotori shook her head as if to say it was nothing.

“...Uh. Um.” Now Shido was the one in trouble. He picked at his skin.

They’d had the tables turned on them. Now that he thought about it, that made sense. The other Spirits were one thing, but there was no way using Ratatoskr personnel as instigators would work on Kotori.

He tapped his earpiece and spoke to *Fraxinus*, a bit of annoyance bleeding into his voice. “...That didn’t work at all.”

“...We made sure it was personnel she’d never met with before. We did special makeup for them, and still.” Reine sounded impressed.

“Th-that is amazing, true. But what am I supposed to do now? We’re not

going to get results with your personnel, right?”

“...Maybe not. We might have underestimated Kotori.”

“S-so then what—?”

“You can’t be so blatant about your communication, Shido,” came Kotori’s voice abruptly, and he jumped. At some point, she had come to stand in front of him with her hands on her hips.

“Oh. Uh...,” he stammered. Apparently, he had been very obvious about talking to Reine.

“Geez... I mean, it’s not a big deal with me. But what are you going to do if other Spirits pick up on this?”

“Ngh...”

Kotori shrugged, exasperated. He hated it, but he couldn’t argue with her.

But staying quiet wasn’t good, either. Shido shook his head to try and change the subject somehow.

“A-anyway... Where are Tohka and Yoshino?”

“Mm.” Kotori jerked her chin, and he looked that way to see Tohka and Yoshino bobbing in the pool wearing the floats they had rented.

“Whoa, wow! Look, Shido! I’m not sinking!” Tohka cried out happily.

“...! ...!” Yoshino also nodded her head in excitement.

Whatever else was happening, they were having the time of their lives at the pool for the first time. They were not his objective that day. His target listlessly flicked the stick of her Chupa Chups around, looking bored. He was pretty sure she hadn’t even gotten in the pool yet. And it wouldn’t have been because she couldn’t swim.

“...Shin, what are you doing there? Ask Kotori to go in,” Reine instructed.

On the monitor featuring a torso shot of Kotori on the bridge of *Fraxinus*, a window was displayed once more.

1. SPLASH TOGETHER ON THE WATERSLIDE! HUG HER FROM BEHIND!

2. FRESHEN UP IN THE HOT SPRING AREA! SAVOR THE EXCITEMENT OF MIXED BATHING!

3. SWING AND SWAY IN THE WAVE POOL! “I’LL BE YOUR BOAT—YOUR BOAT!”

“Hmm. Well, everyone, choose!” Kannazuki called shrilly.

The crew members pushed buttons on their consoles.

The results were immediately thrown up on-screen. The most votes went to (1). Next was (2). There was not a single vote for (3).

The crew’s faces clouded over. They had seen these results before.

Kannazuki nodded to himself. “I see. The waterslide.”

“Yes... Well, it’s a compromise. They went all the way to Ocean Park. They have to at least take on the star attraction.”

“The hot spring area is also a treasure, but it’s not a place young people tend to go at the park.”

“Vice Commander, three is a no-go. No three.”

The crew glared at Kannazuki as if to push the point home.

Kannazuki laughed out loud. “Oh, you! I may have been given discretionary power, but it’s not as though I would exercise that recklessly to make my own decisions, would I?”

He brought his mouth closer to the mic.

“Shido, three. Go to the wave pool, and you be the commander’s boat—”

“Hey!” Two crew members jumped up from the lower deck and yanked him away from the mic.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Kannazuki cried.

“Analyst Murasame! Now!” one crew member shouted, holding the vice commander back.

“...Mm? Oh.” Reine flipped the switch for the mic. “...Can you hear me? It’s one. Go down the waterslide with Kotori.”

“Understood... And, like, did something happen? I thought I heard a weird noise...”

“Shido! Boat! Be the commander’s boat! Lie back!” Kannazuki continued to shout from the upper deck where the captain’s chair was.

But Reine ignored him. “...Don’t worry about it. The waterslide. You have to go down it together, okay?”

“O-okay...,” Shido agreed, sounding not entirely convinced.

Reine cut the mic switch, and the crew holding Kannazuki finally loosened their grip.

“Honestly... Why would you do that?!” Kannazuki cried. “Our precious chance! And acting in violence against a superior to interrupt a mission is a serious violation of rules!”

One of the crew members rolled her eyes. “...Remember: In the event that Medical Officer Rindo determines there to be a medical issue, or in the event that more than two-thirds of personnel including Analyst Murasame determine there to be a lack of leadership, that discretionary power may be stripped away.”

“Unh...!” Kannazuki’s eyebrows jumped up, and he looked around the bridge. Everyone was staring hard at him.

He cleared his throat, sweat beading on his cheeks.

“...Okay. Let us not ask about the actions of a moment ago. Now we shall continue our mission.”

“All those who think the vice commander lacks the ability to lead, press—”

“I just said we wouldn’t ask about it, didn’t I?!” Kannazuki shrieked, and the vote was deferred for the time being.

After getting instructions from a strangely noisy *Fraxinus*, Shido glanced over at Kotori.

“H-hey, Kotori?”

“What?” she replied curtly.

He was almost shut down by this, but he managed to continue without losing heart. “Hey... We’re here and all. How about we get in the water?”

Kotori looked at him finally, unimpressed, as if appraising him. “Mm-hmm. Which one?”

“Mm, how about the waterslide?” He pointed at the massive mountain. A long slide stretched out from the top, and people in swimsuits slid down it into the pool, accompanied by shrieks and splashes.

Kotori stared at it, and then sighed. “Pretty cliché... But well, I guess it’s a compromise. Sure. Let’s go.” She started to walk toward the slide. She looked very much the part of a commander keeping track of an operation, rather than a girl having a good time on a date.

Bobbing up and down in the pool, Tohka and Yoshino looked over at them.

“Shido! Kotori! Are you going somewhere?”

“Huh? Ohhh... We were just going to go on the waterslide.”

“Wah-turr-slah-eed?” Tohka cocked her head to one side, her eyes wide.

“Yeah.” Shido grinned and pointed once more toward the rocky mountain. “That thing.”

“Oh...! The people are being carried away!” Tohka’s eyes shone, and she climbed out of the pool with the float still around her waist. “Me too. I want to go, too!”

“H-huh?!” Shido cried out. And rightly so. He was trying to hang out with Kotori to get his likability up somehow. If Tohka got involved, the whole thing would get complicated once again.

“Mm... I’m not allowed?” Tohka’s shoulders slumped in dejection. If she’d had ears on her head and a tail on her backside, they would have been drooping.

Of course, this pained him. But if he didn’t shut her down here...

“...Shin, it’s fine. Take Tohka along, too,” Reine said abruptly in his right ear.

“Reine? Are you sure?”

“...Mm-hmm. This might actually be helpful. Maybe.”

“Uh...?”

“...Oh. Well, anyway, it’s not good to say no to Tohka when she wants to have

fun.”

“U-understood.”

What was Reine thinking? Shido turned back to Tohka.

“Mm, okay. Let’s all go, okay, Tohka?”

“Ooh! Really?!” Tohka’s face was immediately full of sunshine.

He felt like Kotori was clicking her tongue quietly behind him, but he decided to believe it was in his mind. “Y-yeah. But you’ll have to leave the float behind.”

“Shido. Is it...okay if I...wait here...?” Yoshino called from the pool.

“Huh? You sure?” Shido asked, surprise bleeding into his voice. He had assumed that Yoshino would also want to go on the waterslide.

Yoshino shook her head, her face paling. “It’s...scary. Yoshinon...might drift away. Again...”

“Ohhh. Is that it?” Shido grinned. Apparently, she was slightly traumatized by the incident earlier.

“So...I will...wait...with Yoshinon.”

“Yeah? Then could you hang on to Tohka’s float, too?”

“Yes...I can do that.”

Tohka grabbed on to the pool float around her waist and yanked it up. The float got caught on her large chest, and she couldn’t get it off.

“Mm. What is going on? It won’t let me go,” she grumbled and pulled even harder.

The float pulled up her chest rather magnificently and also yanked up the top of the swimsuit she was wearing. A tiny bit of soft breasts peeked out from beneath it.

Shido hurried to stop her. “Whoa, Tohka! Stop! Stop! You need to pull it down!”

“Mm?” Tohka pulled the pool float down, and it dropped smoothly to her feet. “Oh! Wow, Shido! How’d you know that?!”

“Oh... Well. You know,” Shido managed to say, scratching his cheek.

Tohka passed the float to Yoshino. “Okay, I’m counting on you, Yoshino.”

“Okay.” Yoshino nodded and took the float.

Shido turned toward the waterslide and at last noticed that Kotori had crossed her arms in annoyance and was tapping her foot impatiently. “K-Kotori...”

“It’s a big no at any time to make your date wait. If this was training, we’d be going straight to punishment.”

Shido shrank into himself, and Kotori sighed as she marched off toward the waterslide.

“Tohka! Come on!” he shouted as he hurried after Kotori.

“Mm!”

Soon, they had climbed the stairs to reach the peak of the mountain. A staff member at the opening of the waterslide was letting the visitors into the flowing water in order of arrival. Fortunately, there were only a few people ahead of them, and soon it was their turn.

Shido obeyed the instructions of the staff member and sat down at the top of the waterslide, holding on to the edge with his hands.

“...Shin. I told you before. There’s no point in this unless you slide together,” Reine warned.

Shido tapped the earpiece to indicate that he understood and splashed the water in front of him. “C’mon, Kotori! Let’s slide together!”

“What?!” Kotori’s eyes flew open at Shido’s suggestion, but she quickly cleared her throat and averted her eyes. “I-I’m good. I’m not a little kid.”

“Don’t say that. Come on. This kind of thing’s fun sometimes. Okay?”

“Ngh... I told you I’m good!” She crossed her arms once more and turned her face away with a *hmph*.

Maybe this was bad. When Kotori started sulking, there was no talking her out of it.

“You’re not gonna go, Kotori? Then I’m gonna slide with Shido!”

He heard Tohka’s voice from behind him, and something soft pressed up against his back.

“T-Tohka?!”

“Mm. Okay, let’s go!” Tohka laughed innocently while she squeezed him. She was no doubt just trying to be more stable on the water, but...her chest was equipped with two weapons of mass destruction, and so, this more or less caused some problems for Shido.

“What, Shido? We’re not going?”

“O-oh... It’s just, well.” He could feel his face getting hotter.

Tohka leaned around to try and get a look at his face, carrying out a major air raid on his back.

“...Mm.” Kotori lowered her eyes. The deepest of lines was carved out between her eyebrows. Pursed lips turned down at the corners. He knew almost instinctively that she was getting mad at him for being bewildered by this.

But then she did something unexpected.

“Huh?”

Kotori took a step forward and sat down between Shido’s legs.

“Kotori?”

“Wh-what? You got a problem?”

“No... I don’t, but...,” Shido said, his bewilderment shining through.

“...*Good. Nice work, Tohka,*” Reine whispered in his right ear.

“Huh?”

“...*Oh, it’s just, even if it is a date, I didn’t think Kotori would be able to let her guard down and have fun.*”

“R-Reine, is this why you—?” he started and then stopped himself.

The reason was simple. Excited that Kotori was joining the fight, Tohka had

glued herself even more tightly to him.

“Ooh! Kotori’s coming, too! All right! Three of us going!”

Every time Tohka spoke, her sweet breath blew on his neck and robbed Shido’s body of its strength. It wasn’t only her chest. Her stomach, her arms, her legs, all of her was squishy and soft, and just touching her threatened to make his brain run out of his ears.

“H-hey, Tohka... Maybe don’t hold on so...”

“Mmm...” Kotori saw this and gritted her teeth, somehow vexed, before whirling around to change her position.

“H-hey, Kotori...?”

Ignoring Shido, Kotori faced him and grabbed on tightly. Exactly like a koala clinging to a tree. Even though they used to bathe together all the time and hugging her was a part of his everyday life, his heart started beating faster for some reason.

Tohka was excited about this switch up. “Kotori! You for real?! Okay! Then I’m gonna go all in, too!” She grabbed on to the edge of the waterslide and launched the three of them into the flowing water.

“Whoa?! ”

“Eeaaah...!”

Shido and Kotori cried out at the unexpected shock.

The attendant was clearly about to yell at them, when Tohka catapulted them down the slide. Despite the fact that the majority of her powers were locked away, her physical prowess was far greater than that of the average human. Their start was forceful and abrupt. Shido was almost dizzy from the speed.



“Ah! Waaaaaaah!”

“...! ...!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Whipping along the slide, very nearly sliding out of it, the scream, soundless cry, and laughter of the mass of three people trailed behind them as they raced downward.

Just when they were coming up on the sharpest twist of the many twists and turns, they slipped up out of the slide from the sheer force of their descent and were tossed up into the air.

“Eee...?!”

“...!”

“Ooh! We’re flying!”

He heard Tohka cry out excitedly as he felt the buoyancy of his body disappear. Then he plunged into the pool directly below. Water shot up into the air, and waves rippled outward.

“Pwah! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Shido! This is really fun!” Tohka laughed, the first to push her face up above the water’s surface.

But Shido was far from reaching air. For some reason, his body was heavier than it should have been, and he couldn’t get himself to the surface.

“Mm...!” He pushed as hard as he could to stand up, and then he realized what was going on.

“Eh...! Eh...!” Kotori was still clinging to Shido, quietly sobbing, her shoulders shaking. When he looked at her, he saw that the ribbons tying up her hair had come undone.

“Kotori... Are you okay?”

“B-Big Bro...,” Kotori said, sniffing, and looked up at him.

Shido’s eyes grew wide in surprise. “Are you actually cry—?”

“...!” Kotori yanked her hands away and turned her back to him. “My

ribbons... Get my ribbons..."

"Ribbons?" He whirled his head around and found two black ribbons floating on the water's surface. He picked them up and handed them to Kotori. She snatched them from his hand and sank down into the water.

Bubbles burbled to the surface. A few seconds later.

"...Ugh. You're so reckless." When Kotori reappeared, she was the impeccable commander once more. Her nose and eyes were just a little red, though.

"..."

"...What?" Kotori narrowed her eyes at him.

Shido looked at the black ribbons. He'd been curious about them for a while now. April 10. Once Shido learned of the existence of the Spirits, commander-mode Kotori had started showing her face. But which one was the real Kotori? And how exactly had she developed two personalities that were such polar opposites?

White ribbons meant innocent Kotori. Black ribbons were the strong and arrogant commander. It seemed to be more a matter of perfect control over her mindset rather than multiple personalities.

"Hey, Kotori? Why're you wearing black ribbons today?" Shido asked out of the blue.

"What? You don't like 'em?"

"Oh... I didn't mean it like that," he stammered as he looked anywhere but at her. Well, he *did* mean it a bit like that, but he couldn't go telling her the truth.

Kotori jerked her chin up. "...I have to. White me is weak me. Right now, I have to be black me, strong me."

"Huh?" He frowned, not understanding what she meant. "What's that about? Weak, strong?"

"Nothing. If you don't get it, that's fine."

"D-don't be that way...", Shido half muttered, but Kotori looked away.

"...She was going in the right direction there, but she just can't let herself be

vulnerable, hmm?"

He heard a voice in his earpiece.

"...Let's try shaking her up one more time."

"Shaking her up...? I can't handle the waterslide again..."

"...Mm. Don't worry about it. You just stand there and be quiet."

"? What does that...?" Shido frowned again.

Tohka leaped at him and Kotori. "Shido! Kotori! You want to go again?" she asked, the picture of innocence. She really liked the slide, apparently.

"Uh... I-I'm gonna sit this one out."

"...Me too."

When Shido and Kotori both shook their heads, Tohka pursed her lips. "Why? It was so much fun..."

Two small girls wearing pool floats swam by them, kicking their legs. The second they passed behind Tohka...

"Huh?"

One of the girls got caught on the strings of Tohka's swimsuit. Her bikini top fell away and landed on the water. Shido's eyes almost fell out of his skull.

"...?"

A beat later, Tohka also noticed what had happened. She slowly lowered her gaze.

"...?!!" She shrieked silently and covered her chest with her hands before sinking into the water up to her neck. "Sh-Shido! D-d-d-d-d-d-did you see them?!!"

"I—I didn't! I didn't see anything!"

"R-really?!!"

"Really!" Shido desperately proclaimed his innocence, and Tohka sank further into the water, up to her nose, her cheeks reddening as she blew bubbles before she finally recovered the top floating on the water and put it back on.

He heaved a sigh of relief. The truth was he had seen a bit—a *tiny* bit—but he was not fool enough to actually tell her that.

But that was not the real threat he faced.

“...Shido.”

He heard a voice filled with quiet anger and jumped.

“K-Ko...tori?”

“...You said you preferred a chest just starting to fill out.”

“Huh?” He had not been expecting her to say that.

A right jab ripped through the air and slammed into Shido’s solar plexus.

“Ograh!”

“Hmph! ‘Ogre,’ he says. Strongest in the land.” Kotori flicked her hand like she was shaking off blood and stomped away.

Shido writhed in agony at the pain in his stomach.

“...*Mm. That just now was not quite it?*” Reine said.

“...Those girls...that went behind Tohka... They weren’t actually...Ratatoskr?”

“...*No, she would’ve caught on if they were. We bought them off with free candy.*”

Shido had visions of candy wrappers dancing before his eyes as he let himself fall onto the water’s surface and float.



The time was 2:10 PM. Shido and his party were taking a late lunch in the food court at Ocean Park. On the white plastic table before them were paper cups with drinks and a large plate full of clubhouse sandwiches. He felt like it was a little too much, but, well, with Tohka, there probably wouldn’t be any leftovers.

“Mm, this is good, Shido!” Tohka cheerfully chomped down on the sandwiches, a broad smile on her face. This was her usual style; she managed to make everything she ate look delicious.

In contrast, Yoshino was nibbling at a sandwich across from her as she

noded. "It's...good."

"Y-yeah? Glad to hear it." A smile crossed Shido's own face as he watched them. It wasn't that either of them was doing anything particular. He was actually just glad to see them eating so happily.

He had an unresolved issue, however, that instantly made the peace in his heart at watching those two turn to worry. And that was Kotori directly across from him, arms and legs crossed, looking bored.

Maybe she didn't like what he had ordered; either way, she hadn't touched the sandwiches. She put her mouth to the straw of her drink every so often like she had just remembered it was there, without saying a word. He could tell by looking that she was in a bad mood.

"...Ngh." Shido groaned too quietly for the others to hear.

It had been more than three hours since they'd arrived at Ocean Park. Although he'd tried a number of approaches with the help of Ratatoskr, he had basically nothing to show for it. It was true that they had the chance to plan more thoroughly with Kotori, but for all that, was she easier to manage than the other Spirits?

Shido shook his head. What exactly about this was easy to manage? Given that she knew why he was doing this, she might have been more stable than the other Spirits. But that also made it almost impossible to catch her off guard. Kotori Itsuka was without a doubt his most powerful enemy.

"...Reine. What are the numbers for Kotori's mood and likability?" he asked the analyst on *Fraxinus* in a low voice, as he nonchalantly hid his mouth.

A few seconds later, a sleepy voice echoed in his right ear. "...Mm. *There hasn't been a significant drop... But no increase, either. It's very obvious when you graph the numbers. It's been flat this whole time.*"

He groaned. He'd expected the lack of increase, but no decrease was strange. That meant Kotori had cooled off completely. Maybe because she could see right through Ratatoskr's instructions, or maybe because her date was actually her brother.

"..."

For a few seconds, a somewhat unpleasant silence reigned.

“Shido. It’s not good to remain silent. You must speak; anything is fine,”
Kannazuki told him.

“Uh. Um. Right.” Shido arched an eyebrow. Kannazuki was right. Having time and nothing to do with it was the worst. Looking for something to talk about, he sent his gaze racing around the area.

Kotori brought her lips to her drink again and then coughed several times.
“Koff! Koff!”

“Y-you okay, Kotori?”

“...Yes. It just went down the wrong pipe.” She uncrossed her legs, stood up, and started to walk away without another word.

“Kotori...? Where are you going?”

“Asking a lady where she’s going when she stands up? If it was anyone but me, you’d be dead.”

“...I’ll remember that.” Shido watched Kotori from behind as she walked toward the washrooms before letting out a long sigh and dropping his head onto the table.

“Shido?” Tohka asked.

“Oh. Sorry. You’re in the middle of eating.” He lifted his face, and as if on cue, his stomach rumbled. Apparently, his own worries had disappeared with Kotori. He reached for a sandwich and scarfed it down. The girls were right. It really was good. He got why Tohka and Yoshino liked them.

“...Hmm?” Shido blinked. Tohka, Yoshino, and even Yoshinon were staring hard at him. “Wh-what? What’s wrong?”

“Oh...I was just thinking you were back to your usual self.”

“Huh?” Shido’s eyes grew round.

Yoshino and Yoshinon spoke up, too.

“Did you...have a fight...with. Kotori...?”

“You relaxed the second Kotori was gone. You’re too obvious, Shido.”

“Huh... I-is it that obvious?” Shido asked, and the two girls (and one puppet) nodded enthusiastically.

“...”

He scratched his head. He hadn't really been aware of it, but it seemed that he had been pretty tense.

Going on a date with his little sister, making her fall for him...and sealing her power. Not only was this outrageously embarrassing right from the get-go, but he was up against the invincible commander of Ratatoskr. The pressure was getting to Shido.

“No, that's not exactly...,” he started.

“...”

“Unh...”

Dubious eyes of two girls (and one puppet) boring a hole into him, Shido leaped to his feet.

“I—I have to use the washroom, too...”

“Oh, Shido!” Tohka called, as he fled.

Once he had moved away from them, he let out a sigh of relief. “...Huh. So I was that nervous?” This was kind of pathetic.

“Reine... You're monitoring my mental state, too, right? If you are, I'd like you to tell me the numbers there,” he said to his earpiece, but for some reason, he got no response.

Soon, however, he heard a different voice from the one he'd been expecting.

“Aah, Shido. I'm terribly sorry, but Analyst Murasame has momentarily stepped away from her seat.”

“Oh, she has?” Shido was about to ask where she went, but of course, he had only just been warned by Kotori about chatting into the earpiece. “Oh...”

It would be weird if he went straight back when he said he was going to the washroom. He didn't particularly have to go, but he could at least splash some cold water on his face. He started toward the men's room.

And then he stopped abruptly.

“Hmm...?”

He heard something coming from behind the vending machines in front of the washrooms. When he listened closely, it sounded like voices whispering. And while it wasn't his business if people wanted to whisper, he felt like these voices were familiar.

“What the...?” He turned in that direction.

And then as if to stop him, Kannazuki called out, “*Shido, that's—*”

But it was too late. Before Kannazuki could put the brakes on, Shido was peeking behind the machines.

“...” He was dumbfounded.

There was a little pocket of space back there. Although it wasn't actually that far from the busy pool area, it was a sad place that felt almost entirely cut off from that hustle and bustle. And two people were in it.

One was on her knees with a lab coat over a bikini for a look that wasn't quite poolside and carrying a black bag. Reine. And the other was Kotori, sitting on the ground, leaning against the wall, holding her head, pained.

Shido unconsciously took a step back and hid himself.

He had accidentally glimpsed his sister in great anguish. The thing to do in a situation like this was hurry to her side, but for some reason, he felt like he shouldn't be here.

“...You okay, Kotori?” Reine asked.

“Yeah... Basically. But I'm on the edge. Help.” Kotori held an arm out at the analyst.

Reine bit her lip. “...I already gave you fifty times the normal dose this morning. Any more, and your life could be in danger.”

“Ha-ha... Now that I'm a Spirit, a little medicine's not gonna kill me.”

Reine made a sour face, but Kotori pieced together words in between ragged breaths.

“...Please. It’s my date with Shido, with my big bro.”

“...!” Shido gasped, and his heart picked up the pace like an alarm bell. His earlier anxiety was nothing at all in comparison. *Thmp. Thmp. Thmp. Thmp.* His heart pounded. Painfully.

He swallowed the saliva that had pooled in his mouth, and suddenly, his throat was dry, shrieking with thirst. His fingers trembled. His legs shook. His whole body shivered like he was cold, even though the temperature in this building was fixed well above freezing.

He knew. He had been told. He should have been ready.

Now that Kotori had gotten all her Spirit powers back, she was fighting the destructive urges that swelled up in her. He knew why she was locked away by herself in a strictly controlled area of the ship when she was the commander. He knew that tonight was as long as she could hold out against these urges.

Shido had been told about all of this.

“Ah...,” he vocalized, unthinkingly. His voice wasn’t loud enough to tell Kotori and Reine that he was there, but it was plenty loud enough to knock his own brain from the inside.

He knew. He’d been told. He’d been ready. And yet. He had been careless.

Calm as ever, arrogant as ever, bold as ever. Somewhere in his heart, Shido had been relieved at this little sister in the black ribbons who made sport of him.

“I...”

He’d thought there was no way this strong Kotori could be swallowed up by Spirit powers. That it would all work out somehow, even if he couldn’t get her to fall for him. That Ratatoskr had some card up their sleeve, and they just hadn’t told Shido. He had simply assumed all this without any proof whatsoever!

Regret and shame ate into Shido’s heart.

What interrupted his thoughts was an anguished groan from Kotori. She was holding her head in both hands and gritting her teeth to withstand the pain, her

entire body trembling.

A few seconds later, she slowly opened her eyes and looked at Reine. "C'mon. Please. This might be the end. If this fails, I'll stop being myself today. Before that happens, I need to see the end of this date."

"..." Reine hesitated briefly but then sighed and opened up the bag next to her. She pulled out a needle.

"Thanks. I owe you."

"...You don't. But this is the last one," Reine said, taking Kotori's left arm and pushing the needle in.

After a second or two, Kotori exhaled at length. Her breathing gradually steadied, and the color came back to her face. "Sorry... I appreciate it, though." She started to stand up and fell right back down on her backside.

"...You can't push yourself so hard. You need to rest a minute."

"I'm okay. If I don't hurry back, that tactless Shido will come poking around where he doesn't belong."

"...No. Hang on a second. I'll go get some water."

"Fine, fine. I get it."

Reine stood up and walked in Shido's direction. Panicked, he started to move away, and then met Reine's eyes.

"...Ah." Her eyebrows twitched, and then she grabbed Shido's shoulders in a totally natural move and dragged him out in front of the vending machines.

She brought her face in close. "...How much did you hear?" she asked, her voice hushed.

"Uh... All of it, I think."

Reine fell silent. Shido swallowed hard.

"Reine. What are you doing here? And that outfit..." he said, glancing at the bizarre combination of a swimsuit with a lab coat.

"...My military uniform would stand out here, obviously," Reine replied as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

“...” He thought this stood out plenty, too, but he decided not to pursue the issue. There was something that concerned him more at the moment. “Reine. Kotori... How long has she been in that state?”

Reine hesitated for a few seconds. “...From the moment she got her Spirit power back.”

Shido bit his lower lip. It wasn't that he hadn't expected this answer. But to have it so clearly laid out did actually make his heart pound even harder.

“So then why?”

“...It's what Kotori wants. She said not to tell you, Shin.”

“...!” Shido gasped and pinched his lips together.

“...The truth is, she told me she didn't want me to tell you that today is the limit,” Reine continued.

“Why...would she...?” Shido asked, his voice trembling.

Reine sighed. “...She didn't want you to go on a date out of pity or mercy.”

“...” He clenched his jaw. His gums must have started to bleed; he tasted a faint hint of blood.

“...So please. Pretend you never saw this. For Kotori's sake.”

“...”



“...Shin.”

“...Fine.” Shido took a deep breath, turned around, and went back to the food court where Tohka and Yoshino were waiting.

“Oh! Shido! That took a while.” Tohka was sucking on her straw, having apparently finished all her sandwiches.

Shido sat down without a word and stared at the two girls.

“Shido?”

“Is something...the matter?”

“...Mm.” He nodded. “The truth is, there’s a jungle cruise tour starting now in the wave pool.”

“Wh-what’s that?!” Tohka’s eyes began to shine.

“An adventure cruise where you get in a big boat and do a lap around the whole wave pool. How about you go with Yoshino?”

“Ooh... Yeah! Let’s go!” Tohka waved her hands excitedly before cocking her head to one side. “Mm...? You’re not coming, Shido?”

“Nah... I need to talk to Kotori for a minute.”

“You do? Then I should—”

“Tohka...” Yoshino took Tohka’s hand. “I want...to...go on the cruise. Will you... come with me?”

“Mm?”

“Please... It has to be you,” Yoshino said.

“Mm, well, if you say so.” Tohka scratched her scalp, looking not entirely displeased. “Okay, Shido—me and Yoshino are gonna go on this jungle whatever.”

“Okay. Be careful.” Shido waved, and Tohka and Yoshino waved back before walking off.

Yoshino suddenly looked back and said, “Good...luck.”

“...Whoops. Took a little too much time there, hmm?” Kotori picked up her

pace as she returned to the food court. She headed straight for the table where she'd left Shido, Tohka, and Yoshino.

Then she frowned, visibly confused.

Shido was the only one sitting at the round white table.

"Shido?" Kotori said, and he slowly looked back.

What the...? He seems different. Before Kotori left, he had been restless and acting suspiciously, but now he looked more like how he usually was with white ribbon Kotori.

"Where'd they...?"

"Kotori. Get changed now and meet me in the amusement park area."

"...Huh?" For a second, she didn't understand what he was talking about. But she sighed a beat later. "Ohhh... You got new instructions from *Fraxinus*? Doesn't look like it's going so well here, so change to the theme park? Hmph, well, I don't car—"

"Nope." Shido cut Kotori off once more and stood up. He put a hand to his right ear, took out the earpiece, and dropped it on the table.

"...! Shido?" She frowned at the entirely unexpected act.

"The truth is, I like the amusement park better than the pool," he said. His voice was extremely calm, but she could hear he was serious.

"Huh...?" The crease between Kotori's brows grew even deeper, and she pursed her lips. "What on earth are you talking about? And, like, where are Tohka and Yoshino? I might be the current mission target, but if you let their mental states get unstable, the Spirit power'll flow back, and you'll have a real mess on your hands, you know? Did you already forget about what happened with Yoshino earlier?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten. They're on the jungle cruise right now. I contacted Kannazuki to make sure they keep an eye on them. Nothing to worry about."

"...What are you up to?" Kotori made a sour face, unable to grasp any part of Shido's intention.

Shido took her hand, and the corners of his mouth slid up. “I’m having fun. I haven’t been to an amusement park in forever. I’m so excited, I can hardly stand it. We’re gonna go on rides until we pass out with exhaustion. Get ready, Kotori.”

“H-huh...?” Baffled, Kotori could only let Shido drag her away by the hand.

Chapter 10

Vengeance Five Years Coming

Ryouko stepped into the SDF Tengu Garrison's CR unit hangar in work clothes and was welcomed by an uproar.

"Hey, something happen?" she called to a mechanic nearby.

The mechanic frowned, looking panicked. "Get outta the way! Can we do this later? Now's not—Captain!" She snapped up straight with a salute.

"At ease." Ryouko shook her head slightly. "Tell me what happened."

"Er... White Licorice disappeared with all its ammo."

"What?!" Ryouko widened her eyes, and she whirled her head around.

Just as the mechanic had said, the place where the enormous White Licorice had been stored was glaringly empty, and several officers and mechanics were running around nearby in a panic.

"So did someone take it out...?" she asked.

"N-no idea. I don't know the details, either."

Ryouko looked around the hangar. She wouldn't know until she investigated, but she couldn't see anything else out of the ordinary. There was no sign of the door being broken down or the transport truck being moved. So whoever took this massive weapon did it without a transport truck.

After a moment of silence, Ryouko spoke to the mechanic again. "What's the current storage status of the emergency equip devices?"

"The emergency equip devices? Wait just a second." The mechanic began to tap the small terminal in her hand.

The emergency equip device deployed a Territory temporarily and immediately equipped a wiring suit. Using this, an AST member could gain the

power of a wizard without obtaining formal permission to equip a CR unit. Thus, they were monitored via computer, and when someone took a device and when they equipped it were automatically recorded in the database.

There was one possible culprit—nothing more than a suspicion at this point. But about the only people she could think of who could move a White Licorice—class piece of equipment without using a transport truck were wizards with a Territory deployed.

Praying in her heart that a certain code would not come up, she waited for the mechanic to speak.

The terminal emitted a high-pitched beep, and the mechanic said in a choked voice, “Captain. Th-there is one person carrying a device.”

“...! Who?” Ryouko demanded.

“O-Origami Tobiichi...,” the mechanic announced, voice trembling.



“AlIIII riiiiight! Kotori! What should we ride next?!” Shido started running, Kotori’s hand in his, after a wild ride on the Drop of Doom.

“H-hey! Hold up!” Kotori shouted, hair flying around her face, as she braced her feet to bring Shido to a stop.

“Hmm? What’s up, Kotori?”

“‘What’s up’?! You know what’s up! Explain yourself!” Kotori shouted.

This wasn’t unexpected. Because as soon as she had changed clothes, Shido had dragged her into the amusement park area and made straight for the nearest thrill ride, whether she liked it or not.

“Explain? I already did. The truth is your big brother loves amusement parks.”

“That’s not an explanation! You’re dragging me around for *that*?!”

“C’mon! Don’t be rude. When a guy hits high school, he doesn’t really get to go to the amusement park so much. I mean, going with your family’s embarrassing. Going with your guy friends is just sad. The only way you get to be at an amusement park is if you belong to the privileged class of girlfriend-haver! Do you have any idea how many thousands of boys want to come to the

amusement park but can't?" Shido appealed to her.

Kotori's eyes grew sharper. "As if I care! First of—"

But then she gasped suddenly.

"G-girlfriend...", she murmured, and her face turned red.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Kotori? Oh! Did you maybe—?"

"I-it's nothing! I wasn't—"

"Did the Drop of Doom scare you? You should've told me before." He pressed a hand to his mouth and started giggling.

Kotori's face was so red, it was nearly purple, and she swung her hand at him.

"Ow-ow-ow! St-stop it!"

"Shut up! Hngh! Hngh!"

Shido managed to escape her attack somehow and pointed at the entrance to the roller coaster. "Okay, Kotori. We ride that next."

"You have got to listen to me!"

"Oh right. I guess you're too short to ride, huh?" Shido taunted, smirking.

Kotori recommenced her attack. "Don't be an idiot! The height requirement for the roller coaster is a hundred and ten centimeters! I mean, I'm not *that* small!"

"Oh? But I bet you're scared, huh?"

"Don't you go looking down me! I'm actually worried *you'll* be peeing your pants, Shido!"

"Whaaat? So then how about we see who's the scaredy-cat?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" Kotori snorted and climbed the stairs with him.

She realized that Shido had reverse psychologied her onto the ride only when the safety bar was coming down on their seat.

"Hmm... Do you think Shido is all right?" On the bridge of *Fraxinus*, hanging in the air above Ocean Park, Kannazuki crossed his arms, unable to relax, and tapped his foot on the floor.

“...Actually, with Kotori at least, this way might be better,” Reine observed in a quiet voice from her seat on the lower deck as she stared at the monitor.

“I wonder.”

“...Mm-hmm. Shin gets the job done. We might have been overthinking this.”

Kannazuki frowned, as if he still couldn't stop worrying, and turned his eyes toward the main monitor.

Shido and Kotori had just gone into a haunted house when Kannazuki cried out, “Oh!”

The screen showed them walking in the dark. When they were far enough in that the light from the entrance no longer reached them, Shido held his hand out to Kotori.

“Here, Kotori. Take my hand.”

“H-huh? What are you on about? Could you not treat me like a child? Or maybe you're the one who's scared, Shido.” She shook her head.

Normally, this was where Shido would fall silent.

This time, however, he nodded and shrank into himself dramatically. *“Yes. The truth is, I'm so scared, I can hardly stand it. So, Kotori, come on, hold your big brother's hand.”*

“Wh-what are you doing, you creep?!”

“Kotoriiii.”

“F-fine...! I get it; just shut up!” Kotori scratched at her head and, after a moment's hesitation, took Shido's hand. And then she dropped her head, a little embarrassed.

It was a charming scene. The crew couldn't understand why Kannazuki had cried out.

“Wh-what's the matter, Vice Commander?”

“Shido, such a missed opportunity. And in a haunted house no less...!”

“What...? He's holding her hand,” a member of the crew objected from the lower deck. “There doesn't seem to be any problem...”

Kannazuki shook his head vigorously. “What are you talking about?! Why wouldn’t he clutch the commander to his chest?! He could have legitimately had his fill of her soft body and perhaps even gotten her to step on his face with the soles of her hard shoes...!”

““ ... ””

Sweat trickled down the faces of all the crew members.

Shido and Kotori had exited the haunted house and were now walking toward the go-carts. At first, Kotori tried to get in a separate car, but Shido beckoned her over, and Kotori got into a larger two-seater cart with him, her cheeks coloring slightly.

“Ah! Aaaah! Shido, what are you...?!” Kannazuki yelped in despair once again. “Why would you get in a cart *together*?! You should have set the commander in a cart on her own and you run ahead of her! The commander chasing you, a sadistic smile on her face! Gradually closing in! And then you fall after persistent attacks on your Achilles’ heel, baptism by bumper! Aah, Commander! Have mercy! Mercy!”

““ ... ””

Kannazuki writhed in ecstasy while the crew once again turned dubious gazes on him. Those gazes suggested that Shido might have been correct in tossing away the earpiece.



“Phew...!” Kotori threw herself down on a bench in the central plaza. It was already five o’clock.

Attempting to conquer the amusement park attractions, she and Shido had ridden and ridden and ridden some more. It was no wonder that she was exhausted.

“Aaah... Holy crap. I underestimated the power of the theme park. It rules.”

“Hmph,” she sniffed. “That’s because you’re a child. I hope you get your diapers off before you graduate from high school.”

“You’re one to talk. You nearly lost it at the splash coaster.”

“Wh-what did you say?!” Kotori yelled and then let out a sigh as she sat back down. “Hmph. Fine. I’m tired. And...well, it wasn’t boring.”

“Yeah?” Shido lowered his eyes and stretched at length one more time. Something cracked in his back. “...How long’s it been since we were at an amusement park? Mom and Dad are basically never home, so it must have be —”

“Five years,” Kotori replied immediately.

“Huh?” Shido was stunned.

Kotori gasped, like she was surprised she’d actually said it, but then continued since she’d already started. “The last time we went to an amusement park as a family was five years ago. We haven’t been once since.”

“I can’t believe you remember. Huh... Five years ago?” Shido rolled the words around in his mouth.

Five years ago. He felt like he’d been hearing those words a lot these last few days.

The year the Itsuka family last went to an amusement park. The year Kotori became a Spirit. The year Shido had locked that power away. And...the year Origami’s parents had died.

Shido stood up wordlessly from the bench and squatted down facing Kotori.

Two days ago, Shido had remembered what happened the day of the fire in Nanko five years ago. The scene with Kotori in her Astral Dress crying. Which was exactly why this question lurked in the depths of his heart—had it been Kotori who killed Origami’s parents?

“...What?” Kotori looked at him in confusion. But after a few seconds, her body trembled, her cheeks turned pink, and she whirled her eyes around.

What exactly was she thinking?

“Huh? Um. So... Do you maybe—?”

“Kotori,” Shido said softly.

“Ee-yeah...!” Kotori replied. “Sh-Shido...? Um. Yeah. Well. I do think we’re

nearing that time... Um. H-how about we at least go somewhere out of sight?"

"...? Why?"

"Wh-why...?" She looked around. She could see several people, but no one was close enough to overhear them. So maybe there was no need to worry about that.

"Here is fine, isn't it?" Shido asked.

"...!" Kotori's red face grew even redder.

"So, um, Kotori," Shido said, staring at her.

"...! Wh-what...?"

"There's something...I want to ask you."

"If you wanna kiss me, then you can just—huh?"

"Huh?"

Shido and Kotori stared at each other in surprise.

"Uh, um. Sorry, Kotori, did you—?"

"Sh-shut up! Forget it! What?! This thing you want to ask. Spit it out already!"

"S-sure ..." Shido took a step back. He was curious about what Kotori started to say, but well, if she was going to insist, then he would go ahead and ask. He cleared his throat and looked her square in the eye. "So, Kotori. Five years ago —"

The moment he started to speak, Shido felt the sound around him grow a little distant. And then he realized that an invisible wall had been set up around him. Almost like an AST Territory.

"Huh?"

Something dropped down from directly above, right where Kotori was.

In the next instant, he heard the roar of something denotating, and his field of view was obstructed by a wall of fire.

"Wha...?" He froze briefly, unable to process what had happened in front of his eyes.

Shido didn't have a scratch on him. The invisible wall around him had completely blocked the blast.

But outside this barrier...the spot where Kotori had been...was unrecognizable.

He took a step forward to get outside the wall wrapped in smoke. The barrier, however, didn't so much as bend at Shido's strength.

"Kotori!" he shouted.

Targeted explosions didn't just happen. Not without an actor, some person attacking with malice, animosity, with the intent to kill.

Shido yanked his face up and gasped at who he saw there.

"Origami..."

Origami Tobiichi was floating in the sky, clad in a wiring suit and a CR unit, looking down on him.

"Shido. It's dangerous here. Get away." Origami had slightly different weapons every time she set out for an attack, but the unit she was wearing now was on an entirely different level from anything he'd seen before.

It was a massive unit, entirely enveloping Origami's body. On the back were several missile pods and containers crammed together. Two arms stretched out from there, and Shido could see a large laser sword with a long blade of light, plus two massive guns that looked like they belonged on a battleship. It was bizarre, like Origami had come out with a whole armory on her back.

There was no doubt in his mind: She was the one who had shot Kotori.

""Unh. Aaaaaaaaah?!""

A heartbeat later, the park guests noticed that something was very wrong. Some started shrieking, and everyone went running.

And rightly so. If it had been just Origami arriving on the scene, some—or even most—of the people might have thought it was a new amusement park attraction. But she charged in firing missiles to scorch the earth. Obviously, they would flee.

Shido didn't move, however. He couldn't move.

Clenching his fists so tightly they almost started to bleed, he glared at Origami in the sky.

"Origami! Do you know what you just did...?!" Shido shouted in a hoarse voice.

Origami nodded. "I killed Kotori Itsuka."

Her straightforwardness made Shido shudder.

"...Killed me, huh? You toss that word around pretty casually, it seems," came a daring voice from where Kotori had been sitting, and the lingering smoke was whisked away as if caught up in a breeze. There, protected by a wall of flames, stood Kotori.

"Haah." She sighed and snapped her fingers. The wall of flames before her melted into the air and disappeared. Then she turned her eyes toward Origami and jerked her chin up, sneering at the other girl. "Origami Tobiichi. I thought you were smarter than this."

"...You know me?"

"How could I not know a girl crazy enough to launch missiles willy-nilly when there hasn't been any alarm and no one's been evacuated?"

"..." Origami was silent, and her gaze grew sharper. She was probably giving a command to the CR unit. Part of the weapon container on her back deployed, revealing countless gun barrels.

A rain of steel pebbles fell on Kotori, with trajectories perfectly controlled by Origami's Territory. Shido was so close that stray bullets came his way, but the invisible wall around him deflected them all. The wall was probably Origami's work, too.

"...! Kotori!" Shido cried out, amid the deafening gunfire, covering his face automatically with his arms.

Kotori held up a calm hand, and crimson flames sprang from her feet to swallow every last bullet.

"Elohim Gibor—Astral Dress Number Five!" she shouted, and the flames rose

up, licking at her body and burning away her clothing.

In the next moment, the flames took on the shape of a fantastical Japanese kimono. The fluttering robes of an angel. Burning sleeves. And snowy white horns. Astral Dress. The castle and armor that would provide absolute protection to a Spirit.

“Camael!” Kotori yelled, and the flames converged on her hand to form a massive battle-ax.

Origami’s face twisted in annoyance.

Shido frowned, unable to believe this look on her face. Origami Tobiichi. The honors student, the ideal. Always cool, always composed. Almost nothing changed her expression.

Origami Tobiichi’s face was now colored with rage as she glared at Kotori. “I found you... Finally...!”

Shido’s body was suddenly lifted up into the air. “Wha—?!”

“Be careful. You get back, Shido.” Origami shifted her gaze and sent him flying gently in that direction.

“Whoa?!” He tumbled down onto soft grass and pressed a hand to his head.

Then he realized that the invisible wall around him had been released. Now was not the time for that, however. He hurriedly sat up and turned back toward where he’d come from, toward Kotori in her Astral Dress and Origami in the massive unit.

“Kotori! Origami...!”

His beloved little sister and his friend. They were both important to Shido, and now they were facing off against each other, brandishing lethal weapons. This was the very worst thing he could picture, a scene he’d tried desperately not to imagine.

“Haah.” Origami exhaled, and the container on her back opened up. A barrage of missiles that made the earlier onslaught look like a few sticks tossed through the air closed in on Kotori on the ground, trailing smoke.

The incredible explosion and blast, a violent shaking and shock wave, cut

through the area.

“Ngh...!” Unconsciously, he covered his face with his arms and narrowed his eyes. But that wasn’t enough. Couching low on all fours, he managed to somehow keep himself from being blown away.

The missiles set out to completely destroy everything in its path and annihilated a corner of the amusement park half a second later. The area where Kotori stood was gouged out of the earth like a localized spacequake. There was nothing left.

This force was simply too great. He’d seen Origami and the AST in battle a number of times, but he’d never see a unit boasting this kind of firepower.

“Kotori!” he called out. He couldn’t see her in the obliterated earth. She couldn’t have been blown away in that attack. Could she?

“Hmph,” came a small voice from above, as if to assuage Shido’s fears. “Quite the naughty weapon you got there, hmm?”

He looked up to see Kotori floating calmly in the sky, not a scratch on her.

“Ngh.” Origami’s face twisted painfully. Countless missiles turned toward Kotori. And that wasn’t all this time.

“Directional Territory deploy! Coordinates two-two-three, four-three-nine, three-six...!” Origami cried, and a spherical barrier took shape around Kotori.

“Hmm?” Kotori frowned.

From where Shido stood, he could tell right away that this was not a field to protect Kotori like the wall around him before. No, this was...

Origami’s missiles passed through the barrier around Kotori and slammed into her.

This time, Shido didn’t have to cover his face. The reason was simple: not a single tremor of the multiple shock waves from the missiles exploding inside the barrier slipped out from it.

He could easily picture the disastrous scene inside the wall. Kotori might have been a Spirit, but even she wouldn’t make it out scot-free after a direct hit from those missiles combined with the contained aftermath of the multiple

explosions.

“Hah...! Haah...! Haah...!” Sweat poured down Origami’s face, and she panted for breath, shoulders heaving. The attack must have seriously overtaxed her brain.

The barrier around Kotori melted into the air, and the dense smoke curled up inside before thinning and disappearing.

Origami’s eyes flew open in surprise when the smoke cleared.

And it wasn’t hard to see why. A mass of bright red flames floated where the smoke had been.

“Pwah!” Kotori poked her face out, little parts of her sooty. “Well, look at you go. I’ve never seen this machine before. New model?”

Kotori waved a hand. Flames once again crawled along her, and her body and her Astral Dress were restored to perfect condition.

“...! Ah!” Kotori face twisted suddenly, and she cried out in pain, pressing a hand to the side of her head. “Ngh... Used. Too much...power...”

Shido gasped. He had seen this symptom before—he’d seen it on the roof of the high school two days ago. And in the scene he’d witnessed earlier in a corner of the pool area. Kotori’s mind was being eaten into by the destructive urges welling up inside of her.

When she was fighting for her life, it was too big of a breach in her defenses. Origami wouldn’t let this chance get away.

“Cleave Leaf—removal...deploy!” Origami shouted, and the blade of her laser sword shot out from the hilt, a beam of light that twisted around Camael and Kotori.

“Ngh...”

“Directional Territory...deploy!” Origami chanted again, and a spherical barrier formed around Kotori once more.

Rather than fire missiles, however, Origami twisted around and turned the massive guns on both edges of the weapon container toward Kotori.

“Destroy her. Blastalk!”

A torrent of magical light jetted forward.

“...!”

Dazzling pale light of destruction. Even Shido, who knew nothing about weapons and ordnance, could tell that this light was meant to annihilate. The barrier around Kotori, which had completely contained the impact and shock wave of the missiles earlier, now cracked, and a tiny bit of magical light leaked out.

The instant it touched the ground, there was an incredible explosion, and a small crater appeared.

“Kotori!” Shido shrieked, practically tearing his vocal cords. His cry was drowned out by the aftershocks of the destructive magical light.

“...! ...!” Origami lowered her arms, looking haggard. Her face was pale, and she was breathing fast. Even though she had been the only one attacking, it looked almost like she was the one taking damage.

In the next moment, Kotori appeared behind her, brandishing Camael.

“Wha—?” Origami’s face twisted in surprise, and she held up her laser blade to counter, but it was too late.

“Camael.”

The flaming blade flickered and closed in on the girl.

“Ah...!” Origami let out a choked scream and slammed into the ground with her massive weapons unit.

Kotori looked down on her with cold eyes and lightly swung Camael with one hand. The flames snapped out at Origami.

“Ngh... Defensive Territory...deploy!” she cried, gritting her teeth, and the Territory activated around her shrank so that it clung just to Origami and her unit.

Camael’s blade beat down into the ground.

“Ngh... Ah...!” Origami’s Territory managed to defend against the attack

somehow, but guarding seemed to have put a correspondingly intense load on her brain. She furrowed her brow in pain and cried out.

Kotori, however, didn't stop. Flaming blade burning brightly, she swung the battle-ax over and over and over, like she was hitting Origami with a whip.

"Oh dear! What happened to all that power? I thought you were going to defeat me! I thought you were going to hit me! Kill me! If you can, hurry up and fly. Turn the tip of your blade, the barrels of your guns toward me. Otherwise... Hee-hee, you'll die first."

"...! Kotori!" Shido cried.

This was clearly not his sister. This was a Kotori who was not Kotori, one whose mind had been corroded by destructive impulses.

"Kotori! Stop! If you go any further—"

She showed no sign of staying her hand. The corners of her lips turned up in a gruesome smile, and she hit Origami's Territory again and again with her flaming blade.

"...! Haah—"

And then on the nth blow, the Territory finally broke, and Camael's blade scratched the weapon container.

"...What? We're done already? How boring," Kotori commented, her voice cold, and dropped down to stand next to where Origami lay panting. "Camael. Megiddo."

The blade scattered from the massive battle-ax, and the base shifted and equipped itself on Kotori's right arm.

"Fine." Kotori thrust the barrel of this gun into Origami's face. "If you can't fight, then I don't need you anymore."

"Kotori! Stop! Kotoriiii!" Shido shouted, straining his throat, as he raced toward the two girls.

The surrounding flames continued to be sucked into Kotori's weapon.

This was the blow that had easily pierced Kurumi's Angel. A human being

would have been helpless taking a hit like that at super-close range.

Origami glared at Kotori hatefully, showing no signs of fear as she panted in pain, her shoulders heaving. “Efreeeeet...!”

An unhappy look settled on Kotori’s face. “You do know some ugly names. I wonder where you unearthed that one.”

Origami ignored her. “Did you...kill them like that? Five years ago... Did you kill my mother and my father like this?!”

“What?” Kotori asked, her voice suddenly very different.

“Ooh! Look, Yoshino! A waterfall!” Tohka cried out from the large boat in the wave pool that lapped the water area inside.

“It’s...amazing...!” Yoshino nodded, apparently excited.

“Just beautiful. I’d love to freeze it,” Yoshino threatened from Yoshino’s left hand, laughing like this was a great joke.

The truth was, the first jungle cruise had ended ages ago, but Yoshino had said she wanted to go again, so they had jumped aboard for a second tour.

Normally, Tohka would have wanted to go look for Shido. But when Yoshino begged and pleaded with her, she had been struck with the brilliant idea of riding on the right side of the boat since they had seen the left the last time, and they had gotten on the vehicle for one more go.

“All right, take a look over there,” the staff member at the bow of the ship announced, gesturing at the volcano to one side. *“This is the biggest volcano at Ocean Park. It’s normally quiet... But it seems to be excited that you all came to visit today. Look, it’s about to erupt!”*

A loud explosion rocked the pool area, and the air shook and crackled.

“O-ooh?!” Tohka grabbed on to the edge of the swaying boat, her eyes round. “W-wow! It didn’t feel that big when we were on the left side of the boat!”

Yoshino’s face grew pale for some reason.

“Yoshino?”

“That...wasn’t it. That was...”

A siren began to blare, and an announcement urging everyone to evacuate began to play.

“Wh-what...?” Tohka gasped. She couldn’t explain it clearly, but she had a definite feeling. Somewhere nearby...there was a being that was the same as her. “Yoshino...”

When she turned to look at Yoshino, she had the same expression on her face.

They felt this faint surge that might have been called the scent of a Spirit, of Spirit power.

With the explosion just now and Shido nowhere to be found, Tohka had a very bad feeling.

“Shido...!” she cried and leaped from the boat into the pool.

“What...?” Kotori asked, dazed. She pressed a hand against her head as if suffering from a headache. Her voice and her expression were not those of a few seconds earlier. This was the Kotori that Shido knew.

Perhaps realizing this or perhaps not, Origami continued, “Five years ago. Five years prior to now. My parents lived in Nanko in Tengu, and they were killed by a Spirit of flames. By you. You roasted them before my eyes...! How could I forget that?! How could I ever forget that?! So I’ll kill you... I’m going to kill you, Efreet!”

Origami screamed and sent Kotori flying.

This wasn’t so much because Origami had gotten stronger as it was that all the strength had drained out of Kotori. Her small body flew through the air so easily, it was hard to believe she was a Spirit in an Astral Dress.

“Kotori...!” Shido shouted but got no reaction.

When she slammed into the ground, Kotori merely opened her eyes wide, stunned, and her teeth began to chatter. “I...wouldn’t—”

Origami immediately deployed her Territory once more, stood up, and turned her large laser sword on Kotori. The light blade flew out and wrapped around the young girl.

“This time, you won’t get out of this. Directional Territory...deploy!”

A barrier sprang up around Kotori—not to protect the target, but to lock her in, a bloodthirsty cage to inflict lethal attacks. Before, she had gotten out in the nick of time, but that didn’t seem likely now. She was sweating and writhing in agony.

“...!”

Shido unconsciously started running. It wasn’t like there was anything he could do. There was no role he could play. In fact, now that he had lost Kotori’s power, he couldn’t even regenerate if he were mortally injured. Even if he did throw himself in front of Kotori, they would only end up being shot through together.

But he couldn’t stop his feet. The reason for this was simple. His adorable little sister was in danger. That was more than enough to spur a big brother forward.

“Territory contract... White Licorice, parallel world drive!” Origami turned the barrel of a massive gun on Kotori.

Shido leaped between Origami and Kotori, and stood arms and legs thrown out to protect Kotori.

“Origami! No! You have to stop!”

“...! Shido. Get out of my way.”

“Not a chance!” he shouted.

Origami gnashed her teeth and glared at him. “I *told* you. I have lived to avenge my parents. I made it through that fire five years ago and devoted myself to this. My life has been only for this purpose. Killing Efreet—killing Kotori Itsuka—is my reason for being.”

“...!”

As Shido listened to Origami, the words of another girl spun around in his mind.

“Because I’m used to it.”

Mana Takamiya. Shido's self-proclaimed real little sister.

"It's my mission and my reason for living to keep murdering you. If you do not fall, I'll kill you until you fall, and if you do not die, I'll kill you until you die."

The girl who had killed the Spirit Kurumi over and over, wearing down her heart to the point where it could no longer go back to the way it was. Remembering the glimpse of her total exhaustion and dark, dull eyes he'd seen, Shido swallowed hard.

Why was he remembering Mana now...? Simple. The girl with the massive weapon before him now looked the same as her.

"You. Can't...," Shido whispered, and Origami frowned slightly. "You can't... You can't kill her! If you pull that trigger, I just know you'll never be able to come back from it...!"

With that single blow, Origami would become Mana. Her heart would be crushed, and it would never go back to the way it was. Precisely because he was so sensitive to *these* feelings in people, Shido knew this. The trigger Origami had her finger on was the final key.

"I...don't want to see that happen to you...!"

Rather than lowering the weapon, Origami kept her sharp gaze turned on Shido and Kotori behind him. "...! I don't care. If it means I can take down Efreet with these hands...!"

"Ngh!" Shido clenched his hands so tightly, his nails cut into his flesh.

But at the same time, he had an idea.

Spirit of flames. Efreet. That name that Origami had said.

"...! Ah..."

A bit of sophistry, sure. He wouldn't argue if someone pointed out that it was nothing more than word games. But it was a possibility, however small. A single thread to salvation was dangling before Shido's eyes, however thin and ephemeral.

"Origami... Answer one thing for me."

She didn't respond. Taking her silence as agreement, Shido continued.

"The revenge you want is against Efreet...right?"

"Yes."

"Not my little sister, not Kotori Itsuka, but the flame Spirit, right?!"

"...What are you saying?" Origami frowned slightly. "Efreet and Kotori Itsuka are one and the same. What exactly are you—?"

"Just answer me! You want vengeance on the Spirit of flames, and the human being that is my little sister has nothing to do with that, right?!" Shido shouted.

Origami fell into a dubious silence briefly before replying. "What you're saying is impossible. It's true, I want vengeance on the Spirit of flames. Efreet. She is not human. But Kotori Itsuka is a Spirit. Your statement is nonsensical."

Shido swallowed hard.

"Get out of the way, Shido," Origami whispered.

"No... I can't do that. All the more so after hearing what you just said...!"

"...Meaning?" She scowled at him, as though she couldn't understand what he was talking about.

"Please. A couple minutes is all I need. Please give me and Kotori some time. And then—"

"I cannot. Now is my best chance to strike Efreet...! If you won't get out of the way—" Origami raised her weapon once more. To go through Shido and erase Kotori.

"Ngh!"

It wasn't that he couldn't understand how Origami was feeling. She would no doubt say that Shido was the one being unreasonable.

It was the most natural thing in the world to hate the person who killed someone you love. It was natural to hate them so much that you wanted to kill them with your own hands.

If Origami did kill Kotori now, Shido would no doubt harbor the same feelings in his heart toward Origami that she held toward Kotori. Even if he said he

forgave her, even if he smoothed things over on the surface—regardless of what he thought he wanted, he was sure that hatred would cling to the deepest part of his heart.

So his following comment would be nothing but the right thing to say. Call him a hypocrite, call him selfish, call him irrational, but Shido couldn't hold his tongue.

"Your parents were killed, so maybe this sounds like lip service to you. I know that if my parents or Kotori were killed, I would hate the person who did it so much, I'd want them dead. I know this is a contradiction! I know I'm being selfish! But I...! I can't look away when my adorable little sister is about to be murdered in front of me. And I can't sit back and watch my friend lose herself to despair!"

"...!" A spasm ran across Origami's face. She lowered her eyes for a second and then shook her head slightly before turning her gaze back on Kotori.

"Even so...I—!" At the same time as Origami spoke, an invisible wall popped up about Shido.

"Th-this is—," he cried. It was the same as the one deployed around him earlier—a defensive barrier to protect the target from attack, unlike the barrier around Kotori.

"Stop! Origamiiiiiiiiiiii!" Shido shrieked, guessing at Origami's intentions.

"Unh! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Origami roared, loud enough to drown out Shido, and set the sights of her raised weapon on Kotori.

But at that moment...

"I don't think so!" came a voice from the sky, as one of Origami's gun barrels was neatly severed.

"...?!" Surprise crept across Origami's face, and it didn't take long for her to spot the attacker. Her lips twisted in annoyance. "Tohka Yatogami...!"

Dancing down from the sky above to attack Origami's weapon was Tohka, wearing a faintly glowing dress over her swimsuit and gripping a large sword in one hand.

“Tohka!”

“Mm. You okay? Shido? Kotori?” Tohka touched down to stand between Shido and Origami, while keeping an eye on the girl.

Origami sharpened her gaze hatefully and deployed the weapon container on her back. Even though she had already fired so many missiles, it seemed that she still hadn’t exhausted her ammunition. Several bullets poked their heads up.

“Don’t get in m—”

Before Origami could fire, beams of light came at her from either side.

“Ngh...” She leaped up into the air and just barely managed to dodge the attack. At the same time, her concentration was broken, and the invisible wall around Shido vanished.

The beams shot through the earth, and the ground there crackled and immediately froze solid. He suddenly realized that those weren’t beams of light.

“That’s...”

A concentrated mass of cold air that froze everything it touched. He’d seen this power before.

“Are you...all right...Shido...and...Kotori...?”

He heard a familiar voice from the direction of the attack. He looked up to find a rabbit doll, much smaller than the last time he’d seen it.

Smooth with a pattern drawn on the surface. Jaw with fangs like icicles. And on its back, Yoshino, clad in a dress that shone hazily around her swimsuit.

“Yoshino!” Shido called.

“Yes.” Yoshino bobbed her head up and down.

“A-and... That’s Zadkiel...?!”

“Y...es. Reine told us. You and Kotori...were in danger. So we came, but... I felt like... I had to help you, and then...this strange feeling in my heart...”

As if to pick up where Yoshino left off, the enormous rabbit-shaped Angel—Zadkiel—rumbled, “*Heyooo! Nick of time, huh?*”

“And...Yoshinon?” Shido tilted his head to one side.

Zadkiel laughed out loud in a way that belied its fearsome appearance. *“I’ll listen to how grateful you are later. But right now—”*

Missiles rained down on Tohka and Yoshino.

“Ngh!”

“Aah...!”

They cried out in anguish. Although they managed to defend against the blow—Tohka with her sword and Yoshino with an ice wall—they hadn’t been able to completely crush this attack.

Both Tohka’s Sandalphon, which was able to cut up everything, and Yoshino’s Zadkiel, which let nothing pass, were probably only manifesting a tenth of their full power. They might have been Spirits, but at less than full strength, it was far too reckless to challenge Origami with the equipment she had now.

“Shido!” Tohka shouted, her face screwed up in pain. “We’ve got this! You run!”

“T-Tohka... Yoshino.”

“We’re fine. You have to go!”

“We...won’t last...that long...!”

Origami glared hatefully at Tohka and then Yoshino. “...! Don’t get in my way. I don’t have time for the two of you right now.”



“Hmph. Kotori saved us, same as Shido did,” Tohka said, glaring at Origami. “We can’t let you take her down.”

“...We can’t!” Yoshino shouted her own addition, nodding.

Origami exhaled slowly and squeezed the hand holding the laser sword. “Then you two will have to disappear as well.” She deployed the container on her back once more and fired several missiles from the pods inside.

“...! Hah!” Tohka’s sword flashed, and a slicing attack flew out from it, causing the approaching missiles to explode on the spot. But she didn’t manage to take out all the missiles. Some slipped past her slicing attack and avoided being ignited by their fallen brethren to close in on Tohka.

A shower of water began to fall from the sky, and the missiles froze just as they were on the verge of touching Tohka.

“Yoshino!”

“I...borrowed some...water...from the pool...!”

Zadkiel’s eyes shone as if responding to Yoshino’s voice.

Tohka and Yoshino glanced at Shido again. Even without them putting it into words, he understood what they were saying—*Take Kotori and go*.

“Ngh! Sorry, guys...!” Shido gritted his teeth and started to run, the breathless Kotori in his arms.

He couldn’t just stand rooted to the spot, worried about Tohka and Yoshino. He had to respect their willingness to risk their lives for him and get Kotori somewhere far away!

“Shi...do...,” Kotori rasped, her face growing pale.

“It’s okay. I’ll get you fixed up in no time...!” Shido told her as he ran, and Kotori nodded a little, seeming a bit relieved.

The sound of explosions came at them from behind. Tohka and Yoshino were putting up a good fight, but even if it was two against one, neither of them had their full Spirit powers back. They were at a disadvantage taking on an opponent like Origami equipped with that massive weapon. In the worst case, it

was very possible that they would be killed.

And he didn't have much time to spare with Kotori, either. Her mind would be swallowed up by the destructive impulse, and she would rampage again like she had the day before yesterday.

Shido couldn't simply run away from this. Kotori, Origami, Tohka, Yoshino. It was all for nothing if he couldn't end this with all of them safe and sound.

And he had just one way of doing that.

"Okay...!"

Shido hid behind a ride and set Kotori down on the ground. Just this movement made her writhe in pain.

"Are you okay, Kotori?!"

"Yeah...I'll manage," Kotori said lifelessly, leaning back against the ride.

He really was out of time. Shido glanced toward the plaza and the sound of explosions before opening his mouth.

"Kotori." Shido placed a hand on her shoulder and stared into her eyes, close enough that he could feel her breath.

"Y-yeah," Kotori replied, her face stiff.

Shido swallowed hard. He was perspiring, and his throat grew dry in inverse proportion.

There was one method left to Shido to save Kotori. He was going to use it now.

"Ngh...?!"

He heard a cry of anguish from Tohka, while the sound of Origami's unit grew even louder.

"Found you...!" Origami was heading straight for them at incredible speed.

"...! Ngh!" Shido gasped and moved his face closer to Kotori's lips.

But there he realized there was an issue that he absolutely could not ignore.

Yes. Likability.

Because he'd tossed away his earpiece halfway through the date, Shido had no way of knowing his likability with Kotori. If it hadn't increased over the course of their date, then all this would come to nothing.

He would be unable to seal her Spirit powers, and her mind would be eaten away by the force of the Spirit. His adorable little sister would be lost forever.

Shido gritted his teeth and shook his head. He absolutely would not let that happen.

So before he brought his face closer, he shouted, "Kotori!"

She opened her eyes wide in surprise.

Shido continued—clumsily but from the heart. "Kotori. Kotori. You are my adorable little sister. The best little sister in the world! My pride and joy! I can hardly stand...how much I like you! I love you!"

"Hah— Hwha?!" Her face turned beet red.

Shido's was the same color. "Kotori...! Do you love me?!"

"Wh-what am I supposed to—?"

Steel pebbles came flying up from behind and shot through the ride that Shido and Kotori were hiding behind. Sparks scattered around them. Then Origami turned a small missile on Kotori.

"Kotori!"

"A-aaah! Come on!" Kotori sent her eyes racing around in confusion. "I do! I love you, too! I love my big brother! I love you more than anyone in the whole world!"

"...!"

Shido made his decision and touched his lips to hers.

A dizziness swept through him. Something that felt like the immorality of kissing the little sister he'd spent years with filled his heart, became an indescribable ecstasy, and slipped out through his nose.

And then Shido felt something warm flowing into his body through his lips. The Spirit's powers being sealed inside of himself, the same sensation he'd

experienced with Tohka and Yoshino.

“...?”

Just like the other day when Kotori’s Spirit power moved through the Path between the two of them, hazy memories poured into Shido’s head, and he raised his eyebrows.

On that fateful day, Kotori had been playing by herself in the small park right across from their house.

No, not playing. It was not quite that. She had simply been swinging on the swings, her mouth turned down at the corners, bored.

Even though it was her ninth birthday, Mommy and Daddy had to work, so they were away. On top of that, her beloved big brother had gone out somewhere.

“Unh... Unh...”

Kotori wiped at the tears in her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt.

She was a crybaby, they said. She cried at the drop of a hat. Her big brother had only just warned her about this that very morning. He might end up hating her for this. No, maybe he was already sick of Kotori and that was why he wasn’t at home today of all days...

Each time her thoughts swirled around in this direction, tears sprang up in her eyes again, and she desperately wiped them away.

She was no good. She had to get stronger, otherwise her brother would hate her. But that thought had the opposite effect. Each time it came into her head, tears spilled from her eyes.

“Unh... Enh...”

And then a voice came from above her head.

“Hey? Why are you crying?”

“Huh?” She lifted her face. Standing there was a person who defied description.

Even though she knew it was there, she didn’t know what it looked like. She

could recognize its words, but she didn't know the sound of its voice.

This *something* was right there.

Kotori shuddered. She had been told to be wary when strangers talked to her, and even if she hadn't been, it would have been weird to not be on the defensive around a being as mysterious as this.

"I-I'm fine. I was just going home," Kotori said and jumped off the swing to run toward her house.

"Hmm. Your mother, your father, and your big brother aren't home. Even though it's your birthday. How sad."

Kotori stopped in her tracks.

"H-how did you...?" she asked, but the thing did not answer. Instead, it continued quietly.

"If you were stronger, your big brother would love you."

"...! That's..."

"Don't you want to be stronger? Don't you want so much power that you never worry about your big brother again?"

"..."

When Kotori fell silent, she felt like the thing smiled. Then it reached a hand out toward her.

A small red gem appeared in its palm. A mysterious object gleaming hazily.

"It's so pretty..."

This unknown "something" smiled again.

"If you want to be stronger, all you have to do is touch it. Then you'll be stronger than anyone. Your big brother will love the strong you."

Kotori swallowed hard. *"Will he...really...love me?"*

"Yes, of course," the thing said. Invitingly. Enticingly.

Kotori slowly stretched out a hand and touched it. She touched it.

"...?!"

The red jewel melted into the palm of her hand, and before she knew it, she was hot like she was roasting in flames. Her clothes burned away from the bottom up and transformed into a strange Japanese-style outfit.

“...?! A-ah...!”

Her face twisted in agony at the heat enveloping her. But it didn't end there.

Bright red flames sprang up around her.

“Ah... Aaaaaaaah!” Kotori shrieked as the fire scattered.

To the park. To the house across the street. To the apartment building next door. To the shop next to that.

The blaze burned bright and wild, intense, violent—enough to swallow up Kotori's entire neighborhood.

Then a flash of light shot into the ground, and the something that had been in front of Kotori disappeared.

Kotori didn't even notice that. Too much else was going on.

A searing pain raced through her. She felt like she was being burned alive. With each flash of pain, the fire around her was thrown in all directions, as if she had become a flamethrower.

“Huh... Wh-what is this...?”

At last, the pain eased up somewhat, and she was able to see again. The scene around had changed completely.

“Ah. Ah. Ah...”

The house she loved, the park she loved, the streets she loved were all on fire.

It was obviously her fault. The belt of flames wrapped around her was burning up everything in her life.

“Stop... Stop...!”

This fervent prayer did not weaken the flames. In fact, they only spread, as if ignoring what Kotori wanted. She screwed up her face, and tears fell from her eyes.

“Shi...do! Shidooooo!”

“Kotori!”

She suddenly heard a familiar voice. It was the voice she most wanted to hear. The voice of her beloved brother.

When she turned around, she could make out Shido in their neighborhood that had been eaten by flames and turned into a wasteland. He tossed aside the bag he was carrying and ran over to her, calling her name.

“Unh, ah, ah, Shido...! Shido! Shido...!”

She called his name over and over as she wiped at her tearstained face with both hands.

When he tried to get near her, however, the flames coiled about her suddenly swelled outward.

“...!” Kotori stiffened. This was bad. *“Shido! You can’t come near meeeeeee!!”*

“Huh?” he said, baffled.

Kotori’s flames had already leaped onto him.

“Shidooooo...!”

She somehow managed to set her pained legs in motion and raced over to him.

On his back on the ground, he was in a terrible state. It was like his flesh from shoulder to stomach had been gouged away, and burns covered the rest of him. Even to the eyes of a layperson like Kotori, he looked beyond saving.

“Shido... Shido! Shido...!” she called to him over and over but got no response.

His eyelids fluttered shut.

“So do you want to save him?”

Kotori heard the voice again.

“...?!” She jerked her face up. And standing there, indeed, was the thing.

“Who...are you...?” She looked up at the something, her whole body shaking.

“Wh-what...did you do to me?! I... I don’t want this power... I don’t want it!”

“Oh. But then he will die. You’re fine with that?” the something whispered.

“...!” This made her breath stop like a spasm in her throat, and she dropped her gaze back down to Shido. *“Is there...a way to save my brother?”*

“Yes.”

Then the something told her about this way—a ridiculous method to speak of in this place of devastation. But Kotori had no other choice left to her.

She was well aware that this something could not be trusted. But it was also a fact that Shido would die if she did nothing.

Kotori took a deep breath and then did what the something had told her.

She slowly approached Shido’s face and pressed her lips to his.

“...!” The white kimono wrapped around her shone faintly for an instant and then gradually melted into the air.

At the same time, flames crawled along Shido’s body, but they weren’t burning him up. When they faded away, his gruesome wounds were gone.

“Shi...do...”

A second later.

“Aaah...”

Shido slowly opened his eyes.

“Shido... Shido, Shido...!” Despite the fact that she was half-naked, Kotori wrapped her arms around him.

“...Kotori. Are you crying...again?”

“It’s just... It’s just...” Kotori sniffled.

Shido smiled, pained, and slowly sat up. *“Ohhh, right...”*

He pulled himself away and crawled over to where he’d come from. He picked up the bag he’d thrown aside and returned to her. He opened the bag and pulled out a small, beautifully wrapped gift bag.

“Happy...birthday, Kotori.”

“What?”

Her eyes grew wide, and her jaw dropped. She had completely forgotten about her birthday. And she had thought he'd forgotten, too.

Smiling at her reaction, he handed her the bag.

Kotori looked back and forth between Shido and the bag before opening it. From inside, she pulled out black ribbons that were just a little more grown-up than her usual taste.

"Ribbons..."

Shido nodded, took them from her, and tied her hair up into pigtails.

Not only was he not used to doing this, but he had only just been on the verge of death. Kotori's head ended up looking rather unbalanced.

But she felt a smile cross her lips for the first time, albeit a faint one.

Seeing this, Shido also smiled.

"Mm. I do love it when you smile."

"Really...?"



“Yeah. So can you make me a promise? ...It can just be while you’re wearing these for now. But when you have these ribbons on, you are...strong.”

“Strong...” Kotori stroked her tied-up hair.

Shido nodded.

She rubbed her eyes and tried smiling more broadly than she had before, her nose bright red. *“Okay. If you say so, Shido, I’ll be strong.”*

Even with that gem the thing had given her, Kotori hadn’t been able to. But with these ribbons from Shido, she felt like she could be just a little stronger.

“Okay! You’re a great kid. Now let’s hurry up and—”

Shido took Kotori’s hand and was about to stand up.

“He’s all better then. Wonderful.”

The something appeared before Kotori for the third time.

“Wha...?” Shido hid Kotori behind him.

The something chuckled. “No need to fear. I have no intention of hurting either of you. In fact, I must thank you for bringing about the truly perfect result.”

“What are you...saying...?”

But the thing didn’t reply to Kotori’s question. Instead, it reached a hand out to each of their heads.

“...!”

Kotori felt an instinctive fear. Shido tensed up as if he was about to bolt, but he couldn’t move, almost as if he had been pinned down.

The something’s hand slowly approached. “But there’s no need for you two to know me yet. I’ll have you forget for a bit.”

The moment the something’s hand touched Kotori’s forehead, the world went black.

“Just now...” Shido scowled, a hand pressed to his forehead.

The instant he kissed Kotori, memories had come flowing into his head

together with her Spirit power. This was different than the memories he'd dreamed the other day. These weren't his. He'd seen these memories through Kotori's eyes. They had been shared with him through the Path.

"I...remember. That time...when I was with...*something*..." Kotori said, stunned. The robes wrapped around her became particles of light and melted into the wind, exposing her pale skin. She fainted.

"..."

The Astral Dress was the crystallization of a Spirit's powers. If she lost her power, it only made sense that this would fade away, too. Because the same thing had happened with Tohka and Yoshino, he wasn't entirely unprepared for it, but for a moment, he was actually at a loss for words.

Kotori's naked body wrapped in the light of her Astral Dress disappearing was so beautiful, it sent a shiver up his spine.

But he quickly sent that thought packing.

A small missile was closing in on his sister.

"Ngh...!" He held her to him and leaped away from the spot.

"...!"

In the next instant, the missile landed where Kotori had been, and a tremendous explosion assaulted Shido.

A burning pain seared his back, and he fell to the ground. Kotori seemed to be more or less all right, but his back was in such a state that he hesitated to look at it.

"Ah..."

"...! Shido...!"

Calling Shido's name was Origami herself. She quickly landed by his side.

"Why—? Ngh! This isn't for medical use, but there must be some kind of..." Origami started, and then her eyes widened.

And that was only natural. The flames were crawling along Shido's body and healing his wounds.

“Ngh! Ah...” He put a hand to his back and checked that there was skin there before slowly pulling himself upright. Then he turned toward Origami.

“Wha...? That—” She looked stunned.

“Yes. Origami. You said so before. That you wanted revenge on the Spirit of flames Efreet and not on the human being Kotori Itsuka.” He stood up. “There’s no point in killing Kotori now. Kotori—my little sister—is a human being! It’s Efreet you want to kill, right? Then shoot me! Right now, *I’m* Efreet!”

“What...is this...?” Origami asked, her confusion apparent.

The Spirit power had suddenly shifted to Shido.

“But,” Shido continued. With the memories that had come to him, he had realized the truth. “Before you do, listen to me. I finally remembered everything. What happened five years ago. What I did then. What Kotori did then...!”

“...! Five years ago... Efreet—my parents—”

Shido shook his head slowly. “From the time that Kotori got her Spirit powers until they were sealed away, I was the only person in the area! Efreet’s power was the cause of the fire, but Kotori didn’t mean to do that! And she would never kill someone...!”

“What...are you saying...?” Origami replied. “There’s...no way! That was definitely a Spirit I saw!”

“Yes... I’m sure you did see a Spirit. But was it really Kotori...?” Shido asked.

Origami furrowed her eyebrows. “...! Then what are you saying that was? The one who killed my parents that day—”

“It was there! In that place! There was a Spirit who did this to Kotori...!”

“Wha...?”

Yes. There was one other in Shido’s memories, something not human.

When he explained about this Spirit to Origami, she bit her lips, looking even more doubtful.

“You’re telling me to...trust you?”

“...Yeah.” Shido nodded. He had no other information to give her. All that was left was for Origami to believe him.

Origami thrust her lowered laser sword forward once more. “...I *want* to believe you. But there’s no way I can. I mean, there’s no way there’s a Spirit like that! It looks to me like you’re lying to protect Efrete—Kotori Itsuka!”

Shido couldn’t back down here. He got to his knees and bowed his head. “Please. Trust me. If you really can’t trust me, then fire on Efrete—fire on me. Kotori’s not a part of this. She’s just a regular human being now...!”

“That’s...not—”

“Origami. You told me, right? That you didn’t want any more people to go through what you went through. You said that’s why you joined the AST.”

“...! What does that...?”

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes.

He watched as her face twisted in anguish, and static rippled across the blade of light. Suddenly, the container and weapons on her back fell to the ground as if they were under the control of gravity once more.

The Territory around her had been released. Origami fell to her knees in pain.

“Ngh... The activation...limit? I— Not now—”

“Origami—”

She tried to pull a 9 mm pistol out of a holster on her left leg. It wasn’t anti-Spirit equipment or anything of the like. Even so, it could inflict a lethal blow on Kotori as she was now.

“Please...! Don’t take Kotori from me. She saved me. Without her, I wouldn’t be here. Please...! I don’t care if it’s the only thing you ever do for me! You have to trust me...!”

“...” Origami hesitated for a few seconds and then collapsed lifelessly.

Final Chapter

Chance Meeting at Dusk

Around the time that the evening sun was falling in the canyon of buildings, Kurumi Tokisaki was rolling her neck slowly on the edge of a rooftop.

Behind her lay several human beings. Actually, all of the human beings in this building were in a state of unconsciousness.

City of Devouring Time—Kurumi's wide-range barrier that sucked up the time of any human being who set foot on her shadow.

The clock of her left eye was spinning counterclockwise to fill in the extra "time" she had been forced to expend the other day. She let out a quiet sigh, and the shadow covering the building slowly gathered at her feet.

It was most effective to keep absorbing their time until the moment of death, but there would definitely be a fuss if this many people all died at once. And given that she hadn't yet sufficiently replenished her time, Kurumi wanted to avoid the AST or that red Spirit sniffing around.

"Haah. It's still nowhere near enough..." She yawned and stretched out her left hand. "Zafkiel."

A massive clock appeared from Kurumi's shadow. The numbers *I*, *II*, and *III* had been lost in the battle, but they were restored now. The *VI* at the very bottom, however, was pale, having lost its color for some reason. Kurumi held up a hand, and the short hand of the clock—an ancient handgun—dropped down into it.



She moved her lips bewitchingly.

“Eighth Bullet. Het.”

The clock of her left eye began to spin forward at incredible speed, and a shadow oozing out from the *VIII* was sucked into the gun. Kurumi brought the barrel of the gun loaded with this shadow bullet to her own forehead in a slow motion and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

The shock of it made her head shake, and then the girl split into two. Actually, that was not quite it. It was perhaps better to say that another Kurumi was born from Kurumi herself.

Zafkiel’s Het—a bullet that created a clone by cutting away the self she was up until the moment she shot herself with it. The life span of this avatar was proportional to the time spent on the generation of Het. In other words, to generate a clone that would exist for a long period, Kurumi had to use up an appropriate amount of her “time.”

“You get the worst mileage, hmm?” she complained as she fired Het at her head one more time. Another Kurumi was born and swallowed up in the shadows that curled around the roof.

Mana Takamiya and the Spirit of flames had erased approximately five hundred avatars on the roof of Raizen High School a few days earlier.

She still had a number of clones in her shadow at the moment, but she needed to replenish her time and build up her forces for now.

“Next time...I will absolutely have you, Shido.”

One corner of her mouth twisted up, and a giggle slipped out of her.

“...?” Kurumi looked back abruptly. She had sensed the presence of someone on the roof when there should have been no one conscious.

It didn’t take long before she understood the true nature of this presence. She exhaled through her nose and moved to shrug her shoulders.

“Oh, oh, it’s you.” Her eyebrows arched, and she narrowed her eyes slightly at the familiar silhouette standing there.

But it was perhaps a little incorrect to say she knew the “true nature” of this presence. This *whatever* had a strangely low resolution that made it very difficult to perceive.

“So? How was he?” came a strange voice.

She couldn’t even tell if it was a man or a woman, high-pitched or low. It was a curious sensation. Even though she registered what the words meant, she couldn’t pick up any defining characteristics of the voice that uttered them.

But it wasn’t like this was the first time. Kurumi simply nodded calmly, without surprise.

“Yes, he was wonderful. I couldn’t in fact believe that someone like that could actually exist until I saw him with my own eyes.”

Yes. She had been dubious when this *something* had appeared before her a month or so ago and told her that there was a human being who had stored within himself the power of three Spirits.

But if he actually did exist...that would have been a huge step toward Kurumi’s objective. She’d assumed it would prove a dead end when she first set up contact, but she was pleasantly surprised. Her sharp nose had detected the rich scent of Spirit powers coming from Shido.

“Did you give up on him then?”

“Hee-hee. Of course not!”

The something snorted.

“But right now, accumulating time comes first. In this state, I won’t be able to kill off that Spirit of flames... However, I’m most certainly not giving up!”

She fired Het at her head again.

“In order to use Zafkiel’s final bullet—the Twelfth Bullet Yud Bet—I must have Shido’s power. I will have him. I *will*. I will not give up. I *won’t*.”

The desire she had thought would never be fulfilled. The deep-seated wish that had smoldered in her heart since she dropped into this world. She had finally found the path to achieving it.

Each of the numbers on the face of Zafkiel was equipped with a “bullet” containing Spirit powers. These manifested by using up Kurumi’s time, but the eleventh—Yud Aleph—and the twelfth—Yud Bet—alone were of a slightly different nature. These bullets required payment on the level of a single Spirit’s life.

If she were to fire them, Kurumi might very well expire on the spot. And even if she were to live through it, she would not have enough power left to achieve her objective.

If she could manage to “eat” Shido—Shido with his three Spirits’ worth of power—Kurumi would be able to fire Yud Bet with plenty of strength left to her.

The power of Zafkiel’s Yud Bet was...

“The bullet to go against time. What on earth do you intend to do with that?” the something asked, as if reading her mind.

“...” Kurumi frowned and averted her eyes. “I do wonder how you know even that. Not only have I never shown anyone, but I have not so much as spoken of it.”

“Well...I wonder,” the something joked.

Kurumi sniffed indignantly.

Yes. The power of Yud Bet was to go against time. A bullet to send the target to a world of the past.

She brandished the pistol in her left hand as she slowly opened her mouth. There was no advantage in giving this mysterious something information. But her lips moved very naturally. Perhaps she simply wanted someone to listen to the desire that she had never been able to speak of before.

“Yud Bet. I’ll use it to go back in time thirty years.”

“Thirty years ago...? Why then?” the thing asked.

Kurumi continued, her finger on the trigger of her pistol. “Thirty years ago, a Spirit first appeared in this world. The first Spirit, the source of all Spirits. I will kill her.”

“...”

The something was silent. Regardless, Kurumi continued.

“I’ll erase the very fact of a Spirit appearing in this world. I’ll make it so that all the Spirits in this world now were never here. That is my heart’s truest desire.”

After a moment of silence, the something spoke. “Oh? You’re surprisingly kind.”

“...!” Kurumi scowled before turning the pistol she held toward the something and pulling the trigger.

But before the bullet she fired could reach it, the something melted into the darkness.



“Reine, how’s Kotori?” Shido asked when Reine returned to the bridge from the medical office.

“...Mm, nothing to worry about. She’ll probably wake up soon.”

“She will...?” He let out a sigh of relief. *Fraxinus* had recovered Kotori soon after the attack, but it looked like there was nothing wrong with her.

“And what about Origami? What’s going to happen to her...?” he murmured, looking troubled. Other AST members had come flying in when the fighting was done and carried Origami off in restraints.

“...Mm. Well, she did mess up pretty badly. It probably won’t mean her life, but... She might be discharged and never be able to handle a Realizer again.”

“...!” Shido gasped. But maybe that was just how it had to be. Although she did have her reasons for it, she had exposed a top secret weapon to the public and put people in danger. The AST’s greatest objective might have been the destruction of the Spirits, but that sort of thing would absolutely not fly.

Well, there was no point in him thinking about that now. All he could do was wait until Origami’s punishment was decided.

He sighed and turned back to Reine. “So then... I should probably get going. Tohka and Yoshino are starving, I bet.” He pointed at the floor and the Itsukas’ house directly below.

After saving Shido and Kotori, Tohka and Yoshino had their powers sealed in

Shido's body once more through the Path and then had undergone a simple examination on *Fraxinus* before returning to the Itsukas' house to wait.

He'd confirmed that Kotori was okay. It was getting to be time to make supper, and it was probably best if he went home for a while at least.

"...Mm, I guess so. They're probably worried about Kotori, too. Go put their minds at ease." Reine nodded, appearing to have no objections.

"Okay. Keep an eye on Kotori for me."

"...Sure, you leave her to me... Oh right. Shin?" Reine called to him just when he was about to leave the bridge. She bowed deeply. "...I'm sorry."

"Huh...?" Shido was stunned. "F-for what, Reine?"

"...Today was entirely an error in my judgment. I misread the situation and exposed you all to danger... I'm really sorry."

"No, that's..." He felt uncomfortable at the sudden apology and fidgeted. To begin with, what was this error in judgment—?

"Ah!" he cried out. "Do you mean having Tohka and Yoshino come along on the date? Well...sure, at first, I was panicked, but they did save us in the end, so..."

Reine jerked her head up and shook it. "...There was also that, true. But my fatal mistake came before that."

"Huh?" His eyes grew round. "So then exactly what mistake are you talking about?"

Reine moved to her seat on slow feet and began to tap at her console with a practiced hand. "...The truth is, there should never have been a date at all today. You could have safely sealed Kotori's powers with a kiss once you woke up two days ago... But Kotori was so excited about the date, I couldn't bring myself to tell you... I'm really sorry."

"Huh...? N-no, that would've been impossible, though? I have to get my likability up first."

Yes. He was sure that either Reine or Kotori had said that. In order to seal a Spirit's powers with a kiss, he had to get his likability with them above a certain

level.

Reine put up a curious image on the monitor. He had seen this before. A graph showing the changes in Spirit likability with time. But there was no line indicating likability on this one.

Wait. Shido realized his mistake. There was a line. A straight line following the very top part of the graph.

“That’s...”

“...The changes in Kotori’s likability toward you,” Reine said and turned her chair toward Shido as she indicated the monitor. “...For the two days since we started monitoring Kotori. There has been absolutely no change in the likability value. It was *maxed out* from the start...”

“Huh? So then... This means...”

Reine nodded. “...I told you, didn’t I? Kotori loves her big brother.”

“Huh...?” Shido gaped at the screen. “Unh...! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Someone kicked him from behind, and he fell forward face-first into Reine’s chest.

“...Mm?” Reine lowered her gaze.

Shido hurried to straighten up again. “S-sorry to intrude...!”

“...Mm. Come back anytime.”

He bowed and then looked back to find Kotori standing there, face beet red, wearing a military jacket over her hospital gown.

“Kotori?! You’re awa—”

“Whatever! Just forget what you saw now! Those numbers are obviously wrong!”

“...That’s not the case. There was no mistake in my device, either.”

“Ten limited-edition milky cream puffs from La Pucelle!” Kotori shouted.

“...I’m sorry, Shin. There might have been some problem with the measurement device.” Reine walked back her previous statement.

“...Uh-huh. Sure.” Reine was rather easily bought off. Shido tousled his hair and turned back to Kotori. “Anyway, how are you feeling? You should probably go back—”

“Hmph! I don’t have time. I have to prepare a report.”

“Report? That can wait until tomorrow, can’t it? You need to rest today at least.”

“No can do.” Kotori’s gaze sharpened. She pulled a Chupa Chups from the inner pocket of her jacket, popped it in her mouth, and flicked the stick up before continuing. “I finally remembered the being who gave me Spirit powers five years ago. Given that there is a non-zero possibility that my memory could be erased once more when I wake up tomorrow, I need to make a record of this somewhere outside of my head and yours.”

“...! Oh yeah?” Shido frowned and clenched his hands slightly.

The mysterious Spirit that had appeared to Kotori and Shido five years earlier. And probably the Spirit that had killed Origami’s parents. Although he could remember its presence, its real identity was still shrouded in darkness.

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Kotori.”

“I’ll use discretion.” Kotori waved him away and walked over to the captain’s chair. She pulled out a small memory medium from her console and started toward the door again. And then she stopped.

She turned her head ever so slightly, so that her expression could just barely not be seen from where Shido stood.

“Hey, Shido?” she asked, her voice quiet. “What you said before you sealed my Spirit power... Was that true?”

“Before I sealed... Um.” Shido went back through his memory and then slapped a fist into his hand. “Oh!”

Now that she mentioned it, right before he’d locked her power away, he had told Kotori, “*I love you.*” That was it.

“Of course it’s true. I love you, Kotori.”

“...!!” She shuddered, and her fingers twitched restlessly. “Uh. Oh. Th-that’s...

|—|—”

“As a sister!”

“Oh, thaaaaaaaat way!” Kotori whirled around with an energy that seemed impossible for someone recently abed and launched a dropkick at Shido’s head.

“Hngh...?!” Knocked flying from the impact, he dived into Reine’s chest once again.

“...Mm, that was quick.”

“I-I’m sorry!” Shido hurriedly pulled himself back up and whirled around toward Kotori. She was already walking to the door.

“Kotori!”

“...What?!” she barked, seeming extremely put out, without turning her face toward him. In a very arrogant, strong tone. A manner that seemed impossible for crybaby Kotori.

Shido scratched his head, sighed, and called to her back, “Those ribbons look amazing on you!”

“...!” She looked back, surprised. And then, after meeting Shido’s eyes for a few seconds...

“...Mm. Thanks, Big Bro,” she whispered and left the bridge.

Afterword

We come at last to the Kotori volume. This has been *Date A Live, Vol. 4: Sister Itsuka*. How did you enjoy it?

I ended the last volume with that cliffhanger, and I was finally able to show off an illustration of Kotori's Spirit form in this one. After many twists and turns in the creation of Kotori's Astral Dress, Angel, and code name, I settled on a Japanese kimono in the end. The robes and the sleeves are just so cool and billowy. Aah, and somehow erotic. The opening illustration is perhaps the most sensual one so far. You're incredible, Kotori.

And the color insert of Origami is even more erotic. She is a dangerous girl.

Now then, a quick announcement.

Serialization of a *Date A Live* spin-off manga, *Date A Strike*, will be starting in the April edition of *Dragon Age*. It features AST wizard Origami Tobiichi as the main character. The artist is Kakashi Oniyazu. He draws cute girls, intense action, and nice underwear. Since this is a spin-off, there will be new characters and equipment, so I do hope that you'll enjoy this alongside the main series.

Also, a manga adaptation of the series itself is going to start in April in *Shonen Ace*. The artist is ringo. They are capable of a broad range of art styles, and I have high expectations.

Maya Mizuki's four-panel *Date A Origami* is currently being serialized in *Dragon Magazine*. Ugh, Origami! You little pervert!

You know, three different manga adaptations is certainly the luxurious lineup. There is the anomaly, however, that two of these feature Origami as the protagonist. Keep fighting, Shido. You can do it, Tohka.

Work on the anime adaptation is also proceeding apace. There are a lot of

things to look forward to.

Two Spirits are set to appear in the next volume. So I hope we meet again then.

Koushi Tachibana

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